

## **LGBTQ+ Homeschoolers and their Mental Health**

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## Introduction:

My name is Rebekah Nolette, and I was homeschooled from 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Because of this I understand firsthand a lot of the struggles and challenges that come with being homeschooled. As I began my undergraduate education I experienced a lot of feelings of imposter syndrome, as if I hadn't worked hard to get to where I was. When I began taking Social Research Methods my junior year, I knew this would be something I would want to research. To my surprise, the homeschoolers experience was not something that studied much. As I began the pilot to what became this study, I was surprised to see that a lot of homeschoolers had similar experiences to me. As I constructed this survey, I wanted to better understand what factors contributed to homeschoolers mental health struggles.

The current study illustrates many issues that are alive within the homeschooling movement today. As the members of [r/HomeschoolRecovery](#) share with us their experiences of being homeschooled, we get major insight into the long-term impact of homeschooling. Many members share about their complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety, depression, imposter syndrome, and so on. Homeschooling does not temporarily disrupt the life of an individual, it changes the course of their life. The academic literature identifies many possible outcomes of a homeschooled child. Such as stunted social development, PTSD & C-PTSD, other mental health concerns, religious and queer religious trauma.

The results of this study focus on homeschooled adults. One of the most prominent results of the current study is that the mental health of the homeschooled individual is negatively impacted. This can be due to many factors including neglect, abuse, hostile home environment, lack social life, lack of parental acceptance, and so forth. This is an understudied population and requires more research to gain a better understanding of homeschoolers' experiences.

## Review of the Literature:

The literature on homeschooling discusses the factors that may impact a homeschooled individual's mental health, such as abuse, religious trauma, LGBTQ+ trauma and acceptance, and socialization. All these variables can have a significant impact on a homeschooled individual's mental health. This literature review primarily focuses on conservative religious homeschooling because a majority of respondents reported that is what they experienced.

Often discourse surrounding homeschooling is split into three different lenses the parent, the child, and the outsider. The homeschool parent understands the process of educating the child. Homeschooling parent communities allow parents to share ideologies and opinions, these communities are often built at conferences and are heavily influenced by Christianity (Averett, 2016, pg. 47). The child has the deepest understanding of the homeschooling process, but they are also affected by every variable both directly related to their schooling and not directly related to their schooling. This study is focusing on this perspective by surveying adults who were formerly homeschooled. Third, the outsider, the outsider comes in multiple forms. There is the researcher or educational outsider that is studying the homeschooling experience, there is also the judgmental outsider that forms their opinions on homeschoolers biased upon stereotypes and assumptions of the homeschool experience. Any conclusion about homeschooling made by the

parent or outsider cannot be fully accurate because they have not lived the homeschooled experience themselves.

Parents' decision to homeschool often comes from a place of fear, "parental concerns about peer influence at school tend to be formulated on racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized terms: that is parents construct racial, class, and gendered "others" as potentially dangerous influences on their own (assumed to be) innocent, impressionable children (Averett, 2016, pg. 9). Villainization of the quote unquote other. Parents are focused on sheltering their children from aspects of the outside that they find inappropriate or uncomfortable.

Homeschooling merges two separate institutional contexts: education and the family (Averett, 2016, pg. 8). But also, the concept of social circles and the availability of safe spaces. Educators are trained to identify and report abuse at home. What happens when your abuser is your educator? What happens when you are stuck at home? Within homeschool communities, at conferences, speakers frequently encouraged parents to utilize corporal punishment as a method of child training an guaranteed obedience (Averett, 2016, pg. 66). While there might be differing beliefs about whether physical punishment is abuse or not, there are other instances of abuse in homeschooling. There are two large arguments used against homeschooling " first, that homeschooling can allow parents to abuse and mistreat their children with little fear of being caught, as their children do not interact regularly with mandated reporters at school, and second, that the lack of regulation and oversight of homeschooling in the United States means that parents can, if they desire, deny their children a meaningful education" (Averett, 2021, pg. 177). Without proper regulations for homeschooling children can be denied quality education and unfortunately a safe home life.

Christianity has a large influence in the homeschool community. "Religion, faith, and morals are often cited as reasons to homeschool" (Thomas, pg.22). Homeschool communities are heavily saturated with conservative fundamentalist Christian viewpoints (Averett, 2016, pg. 50). Many families choose to homeschool because of religious reasons, whether it be because they feel public schools are exposing their children to the secular world, or they want to teach their children with a more religious understanding, or they just want to have more control over their children's education. "Some parents want to limit their children's knowledge and behaviors in order to create strong and upright 'character'. They want to limit these because they understand children as fundamentally innocent, as different from adults, and as having malleable gender and sexuality that can be easily influenced in the 'wrong' direction" (Averett, 2021, pg. 57). In *Perspectives of Homeschoolers Motivated by Religious and Moral Reasons*, when parents are pushed on why they homeschool, many parents claimed religious reasons (pg. 30). Some parents claimed that God called them to homeschooling (Thomas, pg.30). But some parents said they did not want their children exposed to secular teaching, or worldview teaching (Thomas, pg.31). Causing a noticeable disconnect between homeschooled and public schooled children. Both inside and outside of the homeschool setting "religious beliefs can inflict real harm on material bodies, especially marginalized bodies, and mental health" (Ramler, pg. 3).

For LGBTQ+ individuals "queer religious trauma is a subset of religious trauma that aptly illustrates the epistemic harm of certain religious messaging" this messaging tends to focus on the belief that homosexuality or gender nonconformity is wrong (Ramler, pg. 10). This religious messaging is used in the church and in the home. One parent example of this in *The Homeschool Choice* was that the parent should be involved in all same sex conversations to provide their

opinion that it is unacceptable (Averett, 2021, pg. 46). It is important to understand how familial acceptance and love impacts a LGBTQ+ individuals mental health. “Sexual/gender minority youth are more likely than their non-sexual/gender minority peer to exhibit anxiety and depressive symptoms, to consider suicide, and to be victimized because of their identities” (Colvin et al, pg. 1938). Because of their lack of school environment LGBTQ+ individuals might feel trapped in their home environment. “Research has shown that family acceptance is a key ingredient to the mental and physical health of LGBTQ youth, and the family rejection can hamper positive identity development” (Averett, 2021, pg. 187). In *The Homeschool Choice*, parents expressed concern about schools promoting behaviors such as “alternative lifestyles” and lesbian, gay, and transgender issues (Averett, 2021, pg. 45). Homeschool parents are almost acting as a shield, trying to protect their children from the other. “Caring adults and a safe school environment have also been found to be associated with lower levels of suicide ideation” (Colvin et al, pg. 1939). Homeschooling deprives these children of a safe school and home environment. In a normal school environment children might feel they have more autonomy and are able to express themselves both physically and socially.

With this comes the question of socialization. How well are homeschooled children able to interact with and connect with other people? How well are homeschooled children able to express themselves? There is the classic homeschooled kid stereotype, the antisocial nerdy kid that does not know how to talk to people. And while there is “some indication that homeschoolers feel isolated and are more dependent on close, quality friendships for their emotional well-being than traditionally schooled youth,” homeschooled individuals desperately want to blend into social interactions (Green-Hennessy, pg. 442). Socialization is how individuals learn to interact with others, maintain relationships, and become an active member in society. “Many educators, child development specialists, and social scientists claim that homeschooling deprives the child of the ability to develop socialization skills” (Lebeda, pg. 101). While homeschool parents usually oppose this, they are not the ones suffering from this lack of socialization. Social scientists argue that “homeschooling compresses the three spheres in which children need to be successful—home, school, peers—into a single setting” (Lebeda, pg. 102). Arguing that because of this lack of socialization once the homeschooled child becomes the real-world adult it is hard for them to adjust and communicate with their peers. Social anxiety is a major concern, the outside world is scary especially when you almost never have to leave your house.

## **Methods:**

Research procedures: Survey (Via Microsoft Forms)

This survey contains 2 mental health screening methods, one for anxiety and one for depression. These methods are essential in this survey and research. Without obtaining a past and present mental health evaluation we would be unable to measure the mental health of the homeschooled student. These screening methods ask questions about self-harm and suicide. Mental health is the focal point of this research and essential to the success of this research.

Me (Rebekah Nolette) and my research advisor Dr. Oyakawa designed this survey. It consists of 29 questions, both quantitative and qualitative, to better understand how LGBTQ+ students and how their mental health is affected by being homeschooled. We posted the survey to [r/HomeschoolRecovery](https://www.reddit.com/r/HomeschoolRecovery) a total of three times, it was open from 5/26-7/1 and gathered 95 total responses.

Because this study was done in a specific community, as opposed to the entire homeschool population, there are some limitations. Results cannot be generalized to the entire population, rather they give us an insight into how some homeschooled individuals feel they were impacted by their experiences.

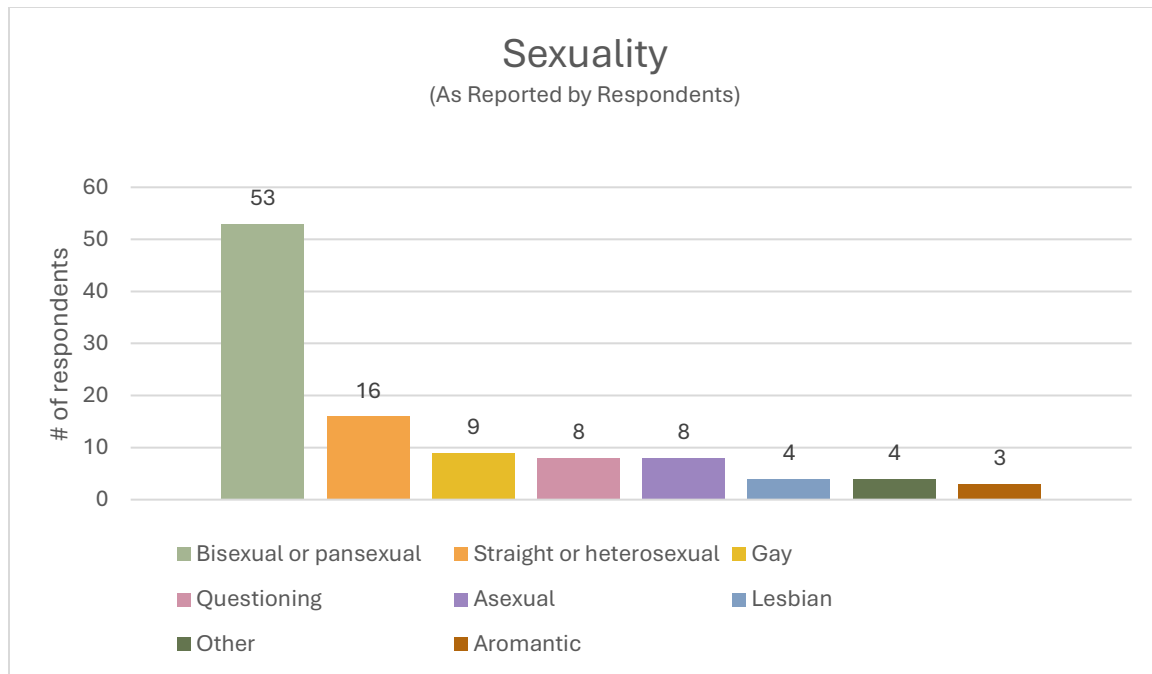
Thank you to everyone who was able to participate.

## **Results:**

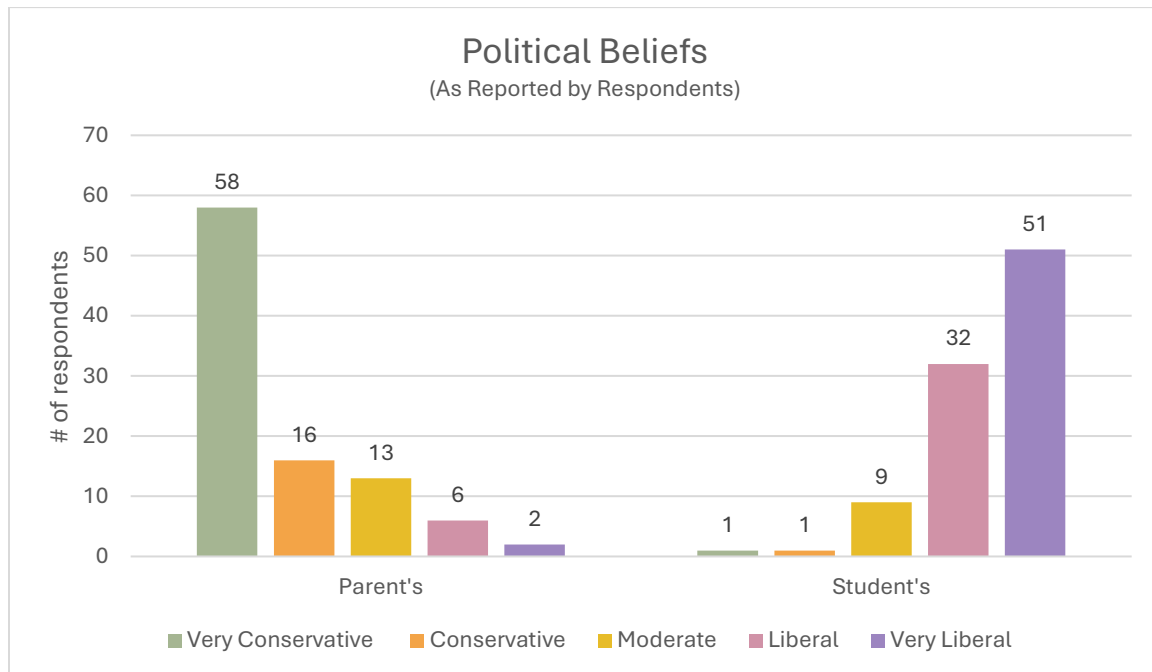
LGBTQ+ Homeschoolers and their Mental Health received a total of 95 responses.

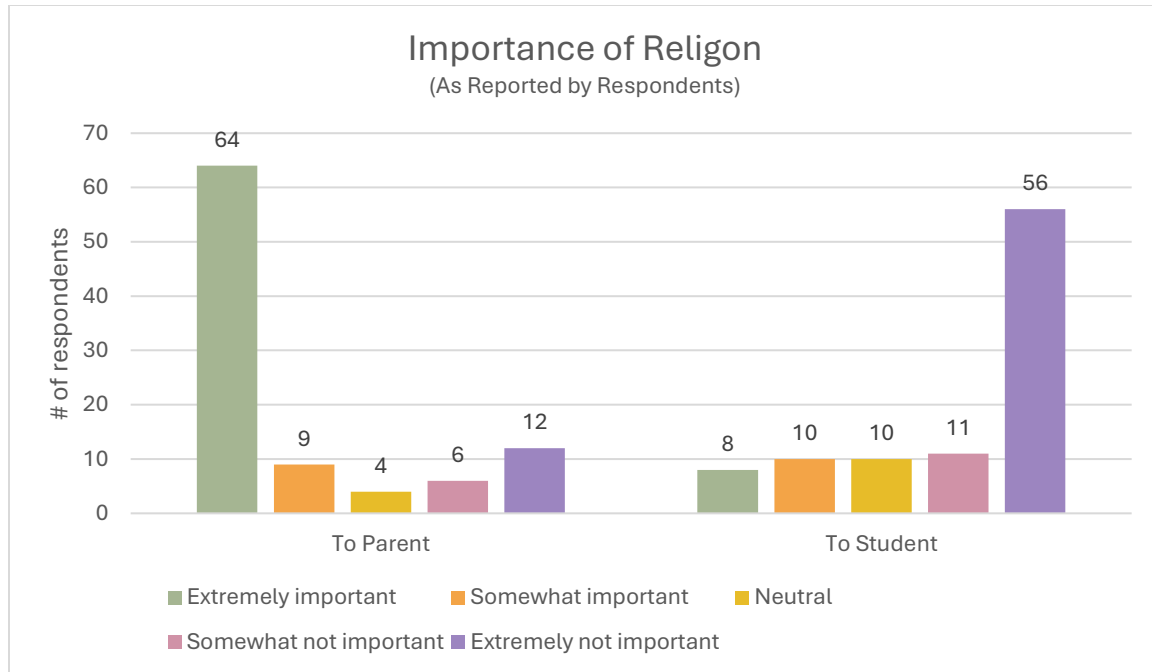
The main scope of this research project is to see the extent of how the mental health of LGBTQ+ homeschoolers was impacted. To determine how mental health was impacted we used two mental health scales, the PHQ-9 depression screening tool and GAD-7 anxiety screening tool, as well as quantitative and qualitative questions to discover other factors that might have impacted their mental health.

**Question #5** on the survey asked about sexuality:



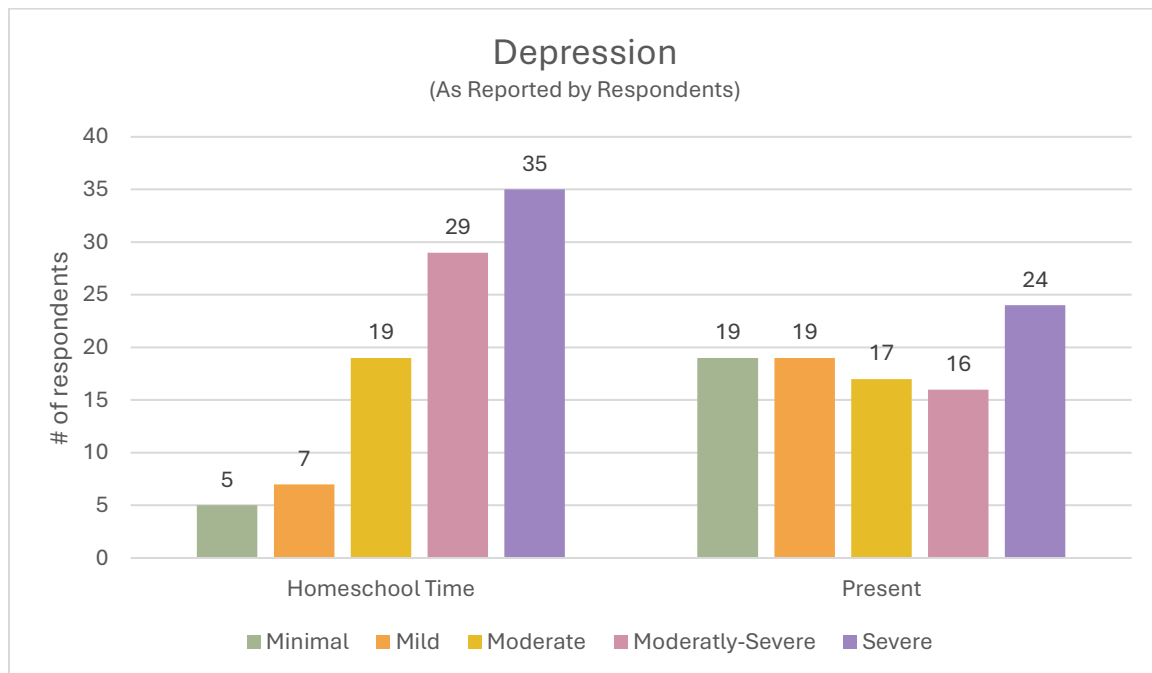
Respondents indicate that their parents' political and religious beliefs differed from their own. A majority of respondents reported that their home environment was very conservative and religious which can cause additional conflict between the parent and child or mental health concerns. There can also be cause for concern for hostile living and schooling environment.





When we evaluate the mental health of the homeschool child, we are asking the respondent to reflect on their time while being homeschooled and then also reflect on their mental health now.

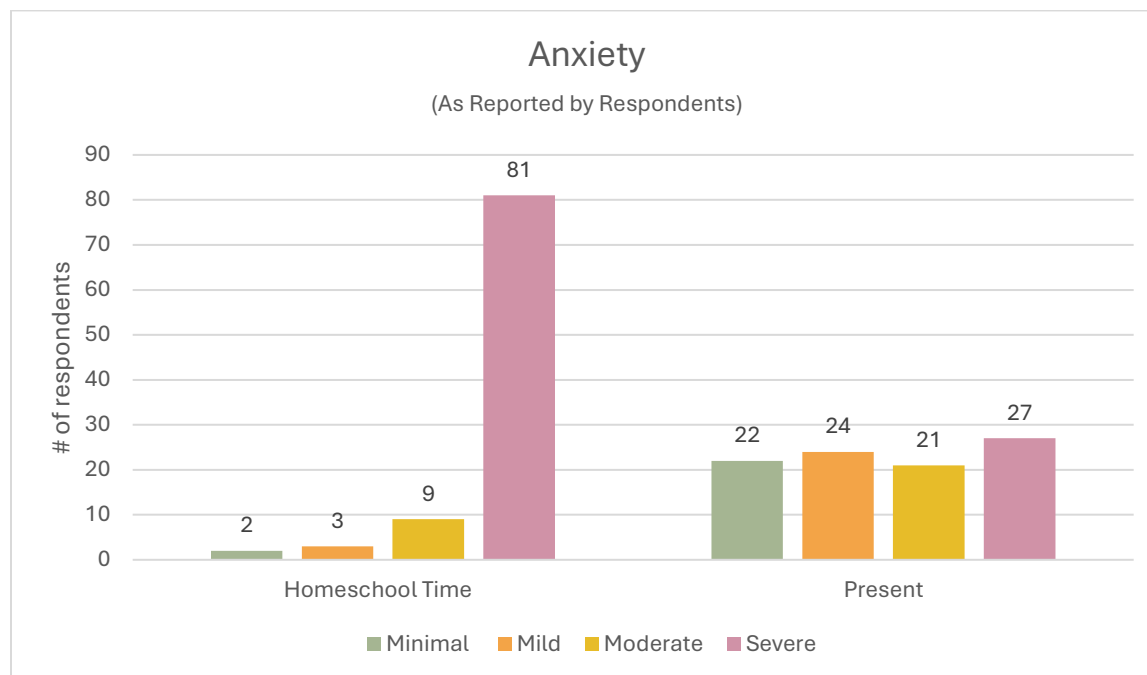
Starting with the depression scales, we used the PHQ-9 depression screening tool.





Comparing Homeschool Time (HST) Depression and Present (PRES) Depression; during HST more respondents reported severe and moderately severe depression than PRES. Many respondents spoke on how they are still dealing with long term depression and PTSD because of HST. This might explain why there are still respondents reporting severe depression PRES.

Then the anxiety scales; we used the GAD-7 anxiety screening tool.



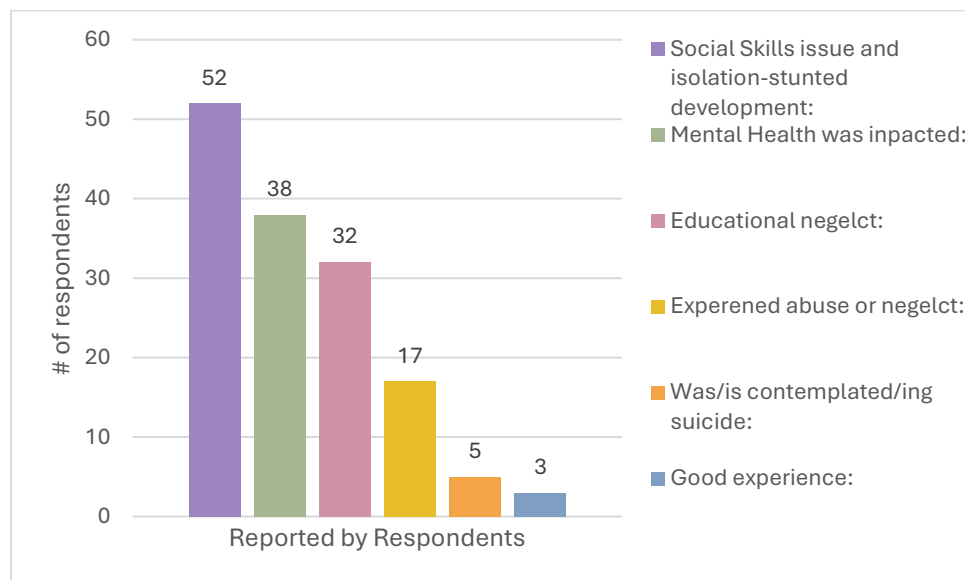
Comparing Homeschool Time (HST) Anxiety and Present (PRES) Anxiety; during HST the number of respondents reporting severe anxiety is significantly higher than PRES. While PRES is more evenly distributed between the categories and is impacted by an individual's circumstance and mental health. During HST homeschooling acts as the constant between respondents, with 81 out of 95 respondents reporting severe anxiety.

The last question on the survey was "How do you feel you were impacted by being homeschooled." Like all the questions on the survey, this was optional, but qualitative answers provided in-depth accounts on homeschooling on an individual level. Allowing us to better understand why respondents reported low mental health rates during homeschooling. This question allows respondents to express their experiences being homeschooled, and how it shaped and impacted their life.

For data analytics these answers were sorted into 6 categories based on statements made by the respondents.

These categories were:

- 1) Social Skills issue and isolation, stunted development
- 2) Their mental health was impacted
- 3) Educational neglect
- 4) Experienced abuse or neglect
- 5) Was/is completing suicide
- 6) Had a good experience



### Respondent impact statements:

#### General Reactions

- “I don’t think I could even quantify how much homeschooling has affected me. It has shaped my entire being. A question I often ponder is ‘how much of me is me, and how much of me is a product of childhood trauma?’ and whether or not a distinction even matters”
- “Homeschooling set the stage for the rest of my life”
- “It hindered my life”

#### Educational Neglect; Mental Health

- “It was such an extreme way to raise a child that I truly don't know what my life would be like otherwise. I can't even separate how I was impacted. My educational neglect has been difficult to overcome, I have had severely bad mental health, I'm in therapy weekly now for over two years. It's impossible to quantify what exactly it did to me”

#### Abuse; Isolation

- “The isolation and abuse that I experienced in the process of being homeschooled nearly killed me. It’s taken years of hard work to overcome unhealthy habits and coping mechanisms I developed during that time. Knowing that public schools had resources that could have helped me remains a source of pain and longing for what could have been”

#### Educational Neglect; Isolation

- “As an adult I constantly feel like I am in trouble. Also because of my lack of education I usually assume I am wrong. I still feel disconnected from people and society and I think I always will because there is an experience bridge that just can’t be comprehended. No one understands and I know that’s a very teenage angst thing to say but it’s true. Only people who have been homeschooled and isolated can maybe understand but I feel like every homeschooled kid had a different experience”

#### Social Skills/Isolation

- “Never got to have much of a social life or real even had friends. Never really got to experience life at its best”
- “In one sentence: I feel that it has ruined my life permanently. In more detail: It has stunted me socially, and I now have moderate social anxiety requiring medication and therapy. I am behind my peers' educational levels, and frequently have to put in a lot of work to catch up. It has also given me no sense of direction or belonging; I am often left wondering what I should do next with my life”
- “I found homeschooling to be very isolating, and I feel it left me ill-equipped to participate in society”

#### Good experience

- “Homeschooling did give me a strong work ethic as I was a very ambitious student and my mother did try her best to provide a rigorous education. It allowed me the flexibility to take community college courses in high school and attain my first degree at 17. However, when I started university, I felt very socially behind compared to my peers, and had to adjust quite a bit. I feel as though I missed out on the social aspect of school, and I think I would have enjoyed it. I was a shy and lonely child as a homeschooler, but as an adult have come out of my shell and am more confident and outgoing. I often wonder if that would have happened sooner if I went to school. I also feel like I missed out on a collective experience almost every other adult has had - going to school. Sometimes it makes it hard to relate to others when talking about childhood and adolescence.”

#### Conclusion:

The homeschool community as a whole is understudied. When we look at the scope of this study, mental health is the main focus. While it is important to understand that this data cannot be applied to every homeschooled student because it was collected from one homeschooled community, the data is telling. It is also important to remember when studying the homeschool experience that we are not just studying the schooling itself, we are studying what is allowed to happen when the student is in the home a majority of the time. Respondents reported

higher levels of depression and anxiety during their homeschool time than afterwards. Unpacking these results with respondent impact statements is important, it helps us understand how and why these students felt this way during HST. The top 3 that impacted the individual 1) social skills 2) educational neglect 3) mental health. All three of these things, especially when combined, were reported to hinder future success in career, social, romantic, and mental health sectors. I believe that these three variables need to be studied more in depth to understand the effect that it can have on the homeschooled individual long term.

**Future Direction:**

I am in my Senior year in my undergraduate education and completing my senior seminar. This has quickly become my passion project, and I have decided to continue my research again. My research Advisor, Dr. Oyakawa, and I have been discussing future plans for this research. Currently we are considering in-depth interviews conducted via telephone or Microsoft teams. I am also interested in doing a content analysis on the subreddit r/homeschoolrecovery itself, to gain a better insight on the members experience and thoughts on homeschooling.

If you would like more information on our ongoing projects, please reach out to me, [rnolette1@muskingum.edu](mailto:rnolette1@muskingum.edu), or my research advisor, [moyakawa@muskingum.edu](mailto:moyakawa@muskingum.edu), at any time.

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