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Autism Diagnoses Up Sharply in U.S.

By SHIRLEY S. WANG



One in every 88 U.S. children has been diagnosed with an autism-like disorder, a government report says, up sharply since figures were last published in 2009, but the reasons for the increase largely remain a puzzle to public-health officials. Shirley Wang has details on The News Hub.

One in every 88 U.S. children has been diagnosed with autism or an autism-related disorder, a government report says, up sharply since figures were last published in 2009. But the reasons for the increase largely remain a puzzle to public-health officials.

The number of kids identified as "on the autism spectrum," marked by substantial social impairment and repetitive behaviors, has been on the rise for years.

Thursday's numbers, put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, show a 23% increase over data gathered in 2006 and a 78% increase from 2002. About five times as many boys as girls have been diagnosed, according to the latest data, similar to 2006.

Public-health officials say that the jump is partly due to an increase in the identification and diagnosis of younger and minority children but that this wasn't responsible for the entire trend.

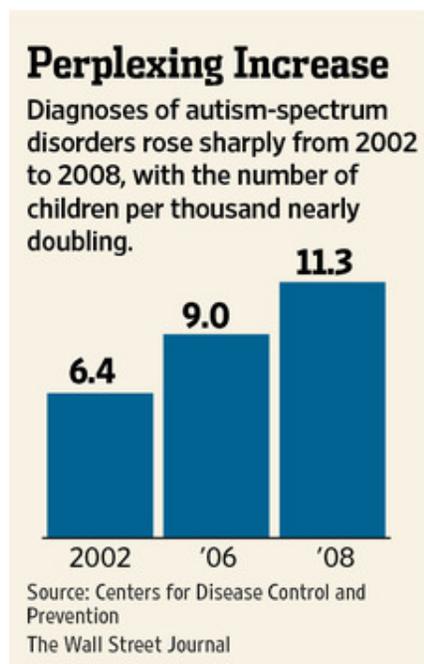
Whether there was actually an increase in the incidence of autism during the period remains a pressing question.

"People want answers to what's causing autism and to why we're



Associated Press

Christopher Astacio with his 2-year-old daughter, who was recently diagnosed with a mild form of autism, on Wednesday in New York.



seeing such an increase in identified cases," said Thomas Frieden, the director of the CDC, in a conference call. "So do we."

Still, he said, the data make it clear that "many children are not receiving services early enough or not consistently enough to help them reach their full potential."

The latest data come from medical and education records collected in 2008 from more than 300,000 8-year-olds in 14 states across the country. Research suggests that this is the age by which the most children with autism have been identified.

The survey wasn't designed to determine causes but is useful in assembling a "more complete picture of autism" and in helping communities plan services for children, said Coleen Boyle, director of the CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities.

The causes of autism remain unknown, though a variety of risk factors for the disorder have been identified, including advanced parental age and preterm birth. The search continues, and the debate often has been heated, especially over a potential link to vaccines, though that has been widely discredited.

Proposed changes to the diagnostic criteria for autism disorders in the revision of the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual have also spurred debate. They suggest one set of criteria to encompass all subtypes of autism-spectrum disorders. Some experts and advocates worry that will cut off some people who are currently diagnosed from services they need.

Some experts have concerns about the way the new CDC data were collected and analyzed.

For instance, the report doesn't separate the kids classified as having been diagnosed with autism, the more serious affliction, from those with Asperger's syndrome, or an unspecified form of pervasive development disorder, which "is a very easy label to get."

The jump in diagnoses could include more mild cases being diagnosed now than before, said Fred Volkmar, director of the Child Study Center at Yale University, who wasn't involved in the study.

The CDC said it doesn't have complete data on subtypes, but of the data it does have, the proportion of children diagnosed with each of the subtypes is similar in 2006 and 2008.

Dr. Volkmar said it is possible there was in fact an increase in the rate of autism over the long run, because of changes over time such as a greater prevalence of older fathers contributing sperm with small genetic abnormalities. But he is skeptical about the magnitude of change over such a short period.

"It seems fairly fast for that kind of change," said Dr. Volkmar.

Rebecca Landa, director of the Center for Autism and Related Disorders at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, doesn't think the increase can be attributed to the study methods alone or to a purely diagnostic issue.

"However, certainly the reasons for the rise need to be investigated," said Dr. Landa, who contributed data to the report. "The big questions about the rise really have to come after we understand more about the causes."

The CDC cautions that the latest data aren't nationally representative and that the rates of these disorders may vary across the country. There were also substantial differences in the rate of change among 11 states that completed the survey in both 2006 and 2008, ranging from a decrease of 20% in Alabama to an 80% increase in Florida, according to the report.

Thomas Insel, head of the National Institute of Mental Health, who wasn't involved in the CDC's report, said while detection of these conditions contributes to the increasing rate of autism-spectrum disorders, "it certainly feels to most of us who've been in the field for a long time that there are more children affected." However, "we just don't have the type of evidence we have for HIV [and other areas of health] where there's been a dramatic increase," Dr. Insel said.

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