

U.S. Autism Prevalence Rises 57% in 4 Years

CDC Report Highlights Increased Prevalence, Continued Delay in Identification as Critical Public Health Crisis affecting American Families

Bethesda, MD (December 18, 2009) -- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released their national autism prevalence report today, confirming that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the United States is 1 percent of the population, or one in 110 of children 8 years of age in 2006.

The long-awaited report was conducted by the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network in 11 sites in 2006 and tracks prevalence in children 8 years of age. The Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network is a group of programs funded by CDC to determine the number of people with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the United States. The ADDM sites all collect data using the same surveillance methods, which are modeled after CDC's Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Surveillance Program (MADDSP).

"This report confirms what we at the Autism Society have been saying for years about the prevalence of autism in America and the critical importance of early identification and interventions. For the first time, we are hearing our government acknowledge the real increase in autism and validating the impact this condition has on individuals, families and their communities," said Lee Grossman, Autism Society President and CEO. "The question still remains: How bad does it have to get before families receive appropriate lifespan services?"

This report presents a number of other important details, including:

The study suggests that while better diagnosis accounts for some of the prevalence, a true increase cannot be ruled out. The report also underscores that "efforts are needed to understand how complex genetic and environmental factors interact to result in symptoms which make up the autism spectrum." The report again highlights that delays in identification still persist. Children in 2006 were being diagnosed only five months earlier on average than those in 2002, thus still missing the critical years of early intervention. (In 2002, children were diagnosed at an average age of 53 – 66 months, and in 2006, the average age was 50 – 60 months.) The report laudably notes that the continued lag in identification needs to be addressed as a public health concern so that this nation "can ensure that children in the U.S. receive optimal early intervention services."

Increases in prevalence among minority population were significant, with a 91 percent increase in Hispanic children (with 144 percent increase in Arizona contributing to this) and 41 percent in black non-Hispanic. There was a 55 percent increase in White non-Hispanic.

Prevalence in boys was found to be 4.5 times higher in males than females. The report states one in 70 boys and one in 315 females have autism.

This study gathered data on prevalence and cognitive impairment, showing a 90 percent increase in children with borderline intellectual functioning and a 72 percent increase among children with average to above average intelligence. As intelligence testing is unstable in the autism community, further analysis needs to be done to understand this change.

Overall prevalence was lower among the sites with access to health evaluations alone, so sites that did not include educational evaluations likely underestimated ASD prevalence for that site. The lack of educational data would have impacted the cognitive functioning analysis as well. It is important to note the ADDM study does not cover adult prevalence or those children who receive diagnoses later than 8, which can be common in the Asperger's community, where the average age of diagnosis is 11 years old.

The ADDM report, which was conducted in the states of Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Wisconsin, is consistent with the Department of Health and Human Services National Survey of Children's Health, published last October.

The increasing numbers have long-term economic costs to the country, as autism is a chronic medical condition affecting people across the lifespan. The Autism Society calls on the U.S. government to address the pressing need for community-based services to ensure a better quality of life for people with autism and their families and to increase funding for research into what factors put people at risk and treatments that will mitigate the severest medical symptoms affecting people with this chronic medical condition.