

National Autism Prevalence Trends From United States Special Education Data

Objective. Reports of large increases in autism prevalence have been a matter of great concern to clinicians, educators, and parents. This analysis uses a national data source to compare the prevalence of autism with that of other disabilities among successive birth cohorts of US school-aged children.

Design. Comparison of birth cohort curves constructed from administrative data.

Setting and Population. US children 6 to 17 years of age between 1992 and 2001.

Main Outcome Measures. A disability category classification of autism, mental retardation, speech and language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or other health impairment, as documented by state departments of education and reported to the Office of Special Education Programs, US Department of Education.

Results. Prevalences of disability category classifications for annual birth cohorts from 1975 to 1995 were calculated by using denominators from US Census Bureau estimates. For the autism classification, there were birth cohort differences, with prevalences increasing among successive (younger) cohorts. The increases were greatest for annual cohorts born from 1987 to 1992. For cohorts born after 1992, the prevalence increased with each successive year but the increases did not appear to be as great, although there were fewer data points available within cohorts. No concomitant decreases in categories of mental retardation or speech/language impairment were seen. Curves for other health impairments, the category including children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, also showed strong cohort differences.

Conclusions. Cohort curves suggest that autism prevalence has been increasing with time, as evidenced by higher prevalences among younger birth cohorts. The narrowing in vertical separation of the cohort curves in recent years may mark a slowing in the autism prevalence increase.