PREVALENCE OF AUTISM
AMONG RACES/ETHNICITIES

This article is a review of the following research: Roman-Urrestarazu, A., van Kessel, R., Allison, C., Matthews, F. E., Brayne, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021). Association of Race/Ethnicity and Social Disadvantage With Autism Prevalence in 7 Million School Children in England. *JAMA Pediatrics, 175*(6), e210054.

Many conditions and diseases are known to be more prevalent in certain ethnicities than others. For example, cystic fibrosis is more prevalent among those with Northern European heritage, and sickle cell disease is more common in individuals with African, African American or Mediterranean descent. Given the high genetic component in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is worth asking if there are higher rates of autism in some groups than in others.[1] The answer to this question is not as simple as comparing the autism rates among countries around the world. Not only do countries view autism very differently, they also have varying diagnostic criteria, which can make comparisons difficult.

Despite this fact, researchers have sought to uncover if some races/ethnicities or regions are more likely to have autistic individuals than others. One study showed that mothers born outside Europe were at significantly higher risk of having an autistic child, with the highest risk seen in the Caribbean group.[2] This study also showed that mothers of Black ethnicity had a significantly higher risk compared with White mothers.[2] Another study from the US showed that children of foreign-born mothers who were Black, Central/South American, Filipino and Vietnamese, as well as children of US-born Hispanic and African American/Black mothers, had a higher prevalence of ASD compared to US-born Caucasian children.[3]

In addition to a greater prevalence in some groups, there have been inequalities in how autism is diagnosed and treated. Studies have shown that multiracial children are diagnosed later in life, and have increased difficulty accessing treatments compared to Caucasian families.[4] There is also very little autism research focused on Black, Asian or other minority groups. Race can play a significant part in genetic data. If research focuses primarily on Caucasian participants, valuable information on other groups could be missed. Accurate prevalence data with regard to race is important as it can affect educational programs, social services, and health care.

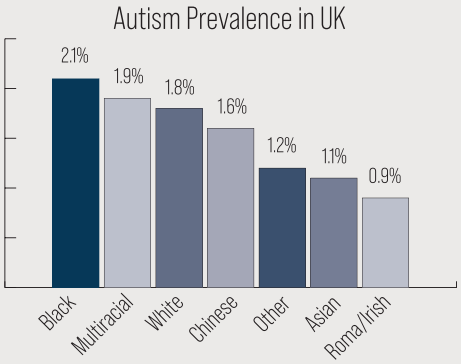
Researchers from the University of Cambridge (UK) sought to determine the latest prevalence of autism by looking at all children enrolled in the public school system in the United Kingdom. They also sought to determine if there were any social determinants associated with autism.

Study

The study used the Spring School Census 2017 from the National Pupil Database in England (UK). This is a total population sample that includes all children, adolescents and young adults from the UK in state-funded education, including special education schools. The study looked at a total of 7,047,238 students, and analyzed the sex, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status of each student.

Results

- The study revealed that 1.76 percent of school children in the UK are autistic. This is about one in every 57 children.
- Male students showed a prevalence of 2.81 percent, or one in 36, while female students showed a prevalence of 0.65 percent, or one in 154.
- About 18 percent of the children with ASD also had an intellectual disability.
- The prevalence of ASD was highest in Black students (2.11 percent) and lowest in Roma/Irish travelers (0.85 percent).
- The prevalence of ASD across England varied. The district with the highest prevalence of ASD was Solihull at 3.38 percent, and that with the lowest was the Cotswolds with 0.63 percent.
- Children who speak a language other than English at home were less likely to have ASD than those who primarily speak English.
- Children who were eligible for free school meals — an indicator of lower socioeconomic status — were more likely to be autistic.



Conclusion

The prevalence of autism among race is a complex topic. This study showed that autism in the U.K. is most prevalent among the Black population, closely followed by multiracial and White populations. It also showed that different regions of the UK have significantly different rates of autism. One in 30 children in Solihull, U.K., are diagnosed with autism, but only one in 159 children in the Cotswolds, U.K., are diagnosed. It is worth asking if race or economic differences are driving these differences, or if they are due to inconsistencies between clinicians.

The study also revealed that males are diagnosed at a rate four and a half times higher than their female counterparts, which is not novel information. Considerable research has been carried out to uncover the reason for this disparity. Some suggest that autism traits in females are different from those in males and are thus more difficult to detect, while others suggest a female-protective effect against autism.

Many questions on this topic remain unanswered. Do race and socioeconomic status play a part in whether children are diagnosed with autism, in when they are diagnosed, and in the type of care they receive? The starting point in answering these questions is acquiring large data sets of information and carefully analyzing the variables. Assessing autism across different races/ethnicities and socioeconomic groups is vital to ensuring that currently underserved populations receive the care they need.

Written by Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine

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