

# An Autism Anomaly, Partly Explained

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## What States Reported

A study of communities in 14 states found these rates of autism and related disorders (cases per 1,000 children 8 years old in 2002).

### OVERALL RATES

New Jersey	10.6
Georgia	7.6
Utah	7.5
Missouri	7.3
West Virginia	7.1
Arkansas	6.9
Maryland	6.7
North Carolina	6.5
Arizona	6.2
South Carolina	6.0
Colorado	5.9
Pennsylvania	5.3
Wisconsin	5.2
Alabama	3.3

### RATES OF BOYS

New Jersey	16.8
Utah	12.7
Georgia	12.4
Missouri	11.3
West Virginia	11.0
Arkansas	10.7
North Carolina	10.6
Maryland	10.2
Arizona	10.1
Colorado	9.9
South Carolina	9.2
Pennsylvania	8.7
Wisconsin	7.9
Alabama	5.0

### RATES OF GIRLS

New Jersey	4.0
Missouri	3.1
Maryland	3.0
West Virginia	3.0
Arkansas	2.9
South Carolina	2.7
Georgia	2.6
Wisconsin	2.3
Arizona	2.2
North Carolina	2.1
Utah	2.0
Pennsylvania	1.8
Colorado	1.7
Alabama	1.4

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The New York Times

New Jersey has its share of unwanted distinctions: it is the nation's most densely populated state, has the highest property taxes, and though it refers to itself as the Garden State, also has the most Superfund sites.

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention bestowed another first on New Jersey, ranking it No. 1 among 14 states it studied in the prevalence of autism and related disorders.

But the ranking also points to some good things about New Jersey that might be instructive for other states - a higher level of awareness about autism, meticulous record-keeping and a wider availability of services in schools and communities.

Some researchers believe that the prevalence rate for autism nationally would look more like New Jersey's if the other states simply paid as much attention to its children as New Jersey does.

A study of school and medical records in communities in those 14 states found an average of 6.6 of every 1,000 8-year-olds in 2002 had autism or a related disorder like Asperger's syndrome. In New Jersey, the number was 10.6 in 1,000. Among boys in New Jersey, 16.8 of every 1,000 had one of the disorders; among girls, 4 in every 1,000 was diagnosed with autism or a related disorder.

The news made headlines around the state. Some advocates and parents of autistic children wondered whether there might be something in the water, air or ground that would explain the anomaly.

The C.D.C. study, which focused in New Jersey on Essex, Hudson, Ocean and Union Counties, did not answer those questions. But researchers did offer some reasons to help explain New Jersey's numbers.

One had to do with the state's comprehensive recordkeeping. Researchers had a median of eight diagnostic records available to them to determine whether a child had an autistic disorder, while researchers in Maryland, for instance, had two.

Although there are many problems in urban schools, outside the cities, New Jersey has some of the best public schools in the country, with one of the highest rates of spending per child.

"We know that public education spending is highly correlated with the identifying of kids with learning disabilities such as autism," said Dr. David Mandell, an investigator in the C.D.C. study.

The state also has a high percentage of college graduates, a large number of diagnosticians with expertise in autism, and an established community of advocates for special education in general, and autism in particular. In one measure of general awareness of the disorder, New Jersey had the second-highest percentage of children diagnosed with autism by age 3, indicating that parents were knowledgeable enough about the disease to seek help early.

"We have a sensitive system and unfortunately we're picking a lot of cases up," said Dr. Walter Zahorodny, director of the New Jersey Autism Study, which was part of the Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey. "If they had the ability to do it as accurately in other places, it might be as high everywhere else."