Autism in Minneapolis higher among Somalis and whites than other groups

By Kelly Lenox

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in 2010 among Somali and white children in Minneapolis was greater than among black non-Somali and Hispanic children, according to a new University of Minnesota (UM) project and resulting community report. The project was funded jointly by several NIH institutes, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Autism Speaks, as well as others. Somali children with ASD were also more likely to have an intellectual disability than children with ASD in all other racial and ethnic groups.

Children with ASD in Minneapolis were typically diagnosed around age 5, which means children are not being diagnosed as early as they could be, according to the researchers. They further report that the overall prevalence of ASD in the city in 2010 was higher than in most other communities studied by the CDC in 2008, though differences in timing and size of communities make comparison difficult.

The Minneapolis Somali Autism Spectrum Disorder Prevalence Project was developed after a 2009 study by the Minnesota Department of Health found higher than expected enrollment of Somali children in the city's preschool special education program for children with ASD. The project was designed to determine whether, among children who live in Minneapolis, the prevalence of ASD was higher in Somali children than in non-Somali children.

Records screening reveals questions for further research

"This project, based on analysis of numerous and varied records, produced fascinating, complex results," noted Cindy Lawler, Ph.D., chief of the NIEHS Genes, Environment, and Health Branch, which administers the Institute's funding for autism research.

Amy Hewitt, Ph.D., director of the Research and Training Center on Community Living at UM, suggests how these results point to next steps. "Future research can and should build upon these findings to better understand how ASD affects Somali and non-Somali children," she said. "This project was not designed to tell us why these differences exist, but its findings support the need for more research on why and how ASD affects Somali and non-Somali children and families differently."

Resources to support earlier diagnosis and intervention

Noting that increased awareness could lower the age of diagnosis and assist families in providing the best possible environment for their child's development, the report concludes by directing families to a wide range of resources, both in the Minneapolis area and online.

Resources include child development trackers, clinics for diagnosis and assessment, intervention programs designed to meet individual needs, and organizations engaged in advocacy and research. One Somali parent quoted in the report shared her child's experience with target intervention. "I have seen my child make tremendous gains when her specific needs were matched to the services she received. What works for one child does not work for another."

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ASD prevalence among children aged 7-9 in Minneapolis in 2010, by race and ethnicity

(Photo courtesy of Minneapolis Somali Autism Spectrum Disorder Preval)