

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](http://rtc.umn.edu/autism/doc/Autism_report.pdf).

(http://rtc.umn.edu/autism/doc/Autism_report.pdf)

The project was funded jointly by several NIH institutes, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

(<http://www.cdc.gov/>)

and [Autism Speaks](#),

(<http://www.autismspeaks.org/>)

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](#)

(<http://rtc.umn.edu/autism/>)

was developed after a 2009 [study](#)

(<http://www.leg.state.mn.us/docs/2009/other/090520.pdf>)

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.](#),

(<http://ici.umn.edu/index.php?staff/view/zbqikqxaf>)

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."

NIH funding for the project was provided by NIEHS, along with the [Unice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health, National Institute of Mental Health](#),

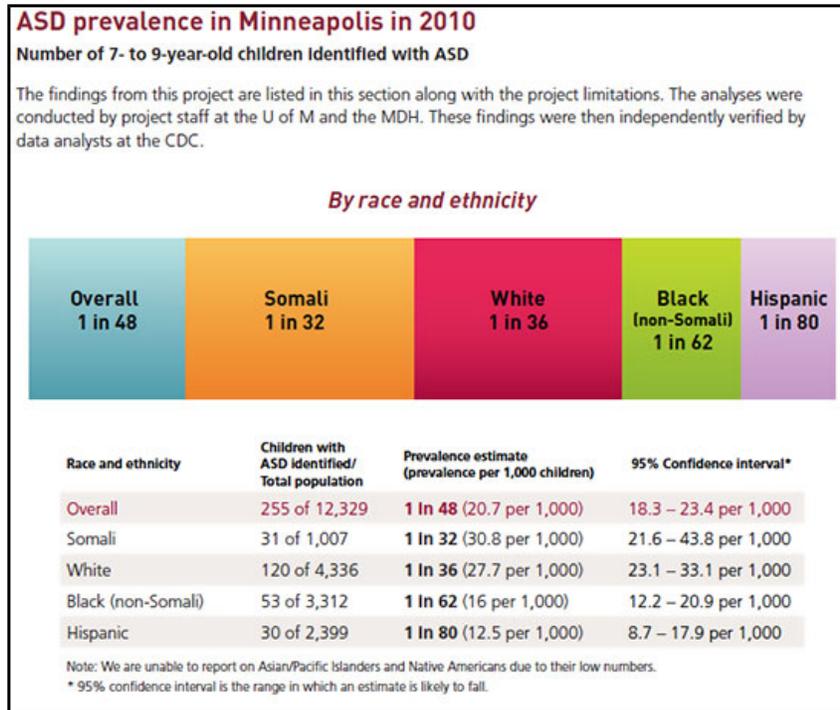


In the early 1990s, thousands of Somali refugees came to United States after civil war erupted in Somalia, a country located in the horn of Africa. Many were resettled in Minnesota, especially Minneapolis. (Photo courtesy of Minneapolis Somali Autism Spectrum Disorder Prevalence Project)



Hewitt directed the project, comparing Somali and non-Somali children in Minneapolis, in response to community concerns about ASD in the Somali community. (Photo courtesy of University of Minnesota)

(<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/Pages/index.aspx>)
 National Institute of Mental Health,
 (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>)
 and National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.
 (<http://www.nimhd.nih.gov/>)



*ASD prevalence among children aged 7-9 in Minneapolis in 2010, by race and ethnicity
 (Photo courtesy of Minneapolis Somali Autism Spectrum Disorder Preval)*

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