

Autism in California increases twelve-fold

May 7 2009, By Sandy Kleffman

California saw a 12-fold increase during the past two decades in the number of autistic people who are receiving services through regional centers, a new state study reveals.

The dramatic rise in autism has broad implications for California families, taxpayers and social service agencies.

"This is a shocking recognition of the challenges we face, today and into the future," said Rick Rollens, the father of an autistic child and a co-founder of the Medical Investigation of Neurological Disorders Institute at the University of California Davis.

From 1987 to 2007, the number of children and adults with autism served by regional centers rose from 2,701 to 34,656, notes a study released this week by the state Department of Developmental Services.

That is a 1,148 percent increase. By contrast, the state's general population grew by 27 percent during that timeframe.

Other disabilities saw much smaller growth rates. Regional center clients with mental retardation increased by 95 percent, cerebral palsy by 73 percent, and epilepsy by 66 percent.

People who have autism now outnumber those with [cerebral palsy](#) in the state, and they will soon surpass those with epilepsy.

Autism is a severe developmental disorder marked by communication

difficulties, an adherence to routines and a lack of interest in socializing with others.

No one knows what causes the disorder, but many experts now believe one or more [environmental factors](#) trigger autism in genetically susceptible children.

The latest findings highlight the urgency in discovering a cause, Rollens said. He added it is ironic that the report is being released shortly before the regional center system faces a \$100 million budget cut beginning in July.

This is the third major autism study produced by the state. The numbers understate the amount of autism in California, said Julia Mullen, deputy director of the community services and support division of the state Department of Developmental Services.

The statistics include only people who are receiving services through regional centers, which represents about 75 to 80 percent of the autistic population, the study estimates.

The numbers also include only those with classic autism. For the most part, people with other autistic spectrum disorders, including Asperger's syndrome and Rett's Disorder, are excluded from the statistics.

In a finding with important ramifications for the future, the study notes that within the next five years, more than 4,000 teenagers who have autism will reach adulthood. They will be added to the 6,000 adults already in the regional center system.

By 2018, the study estimates, the number of adults with autism will exceed 19,000. It is crucial, Rollens said, that the state develop the infrastructure to serve these families, despite the tight financial times.

Mullen said her agency has developed guidelines on diagnosing autism and effective interventions. It also has placed autism specialists in each of the 21 regional centers to work with the community on approaches and programs, she said.

The study reveals that the ratio of males to females who have autism continues to increase. Today, nearly five boys have the disorder for every one girl.

The percentage of people who have both autism and mental retardation has dropped significantly, a trend that may provide clues for those trying to solve the autism puzzle.

Rollens noted that the state does not have experience in dealing with thousands of adults who have [autism](#), but will need to prepare for what is often a lifelong need for care.

"The impact of what we see in these numbers is sobering," he said.

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