

# National Autism Data Center Fact Sheet Series

January 2016; Issue 4



**Life Course Outcomes**  
Research Program

## Special Education and Autism by the States

### How many special education students are on the autism spectrum?

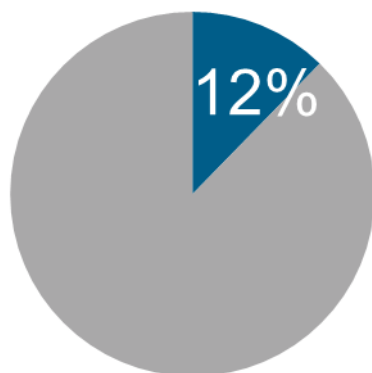
Special education is available to students with disabilities. Its goal is to assist those who require services and accommodations to benefit from normal classroom conditions. Because of this, every child with a disability who is qualified for special education receives an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that specifies what is needed to meet the child's educational needs. By taking a unique approach to each student, special education ultimately aims to create learning environments in which students of all learning styles can thrive. The

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 currently identifies 13 special education categories, some of which include autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance. IDEA is split into four sections: Part A provides a general overview of the act; Part B describes special education rules; Part C involves services for children under the age of three, and Part D focuses on improving special education on a national level. Part B of IDEA requires each state to provide a free appropriate public education in the

least restrictive environment possible to every qualified student between the ages of 3 and 21 with a disability. Information related to special education is collected by states on 20 different indicators, including educational environment, child count, and exiting information. Child Count data was used for this factsheet.<sup>1</sup> More information on how these data are collected can be found on the U.S. Department of Education's official website: [www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov).

### Public school students, disability, and autism: by the numbers

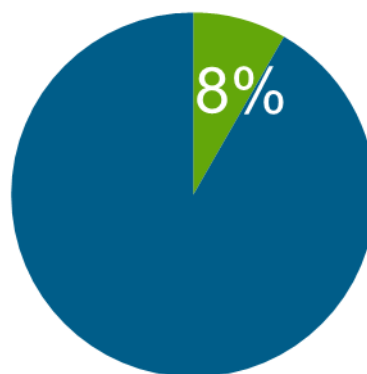
**About one in eight US public students receives special education services under IDEA.**



of all public school students qualify for special education services due to educational needs related to their disability.

Data on counts of students in public schools comes from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The OCR collects data on key education and civil rights issues in all US public schools.

**Eight percent of IDEA students have a classification of ASD.**



of all students with disabilities have ASD.

There were 575,796 students with autism age 3-21 counted in the 50 states and the District of Columbia in the 2013/14 school year. Counts were not available in this year for the state of Wyoming.

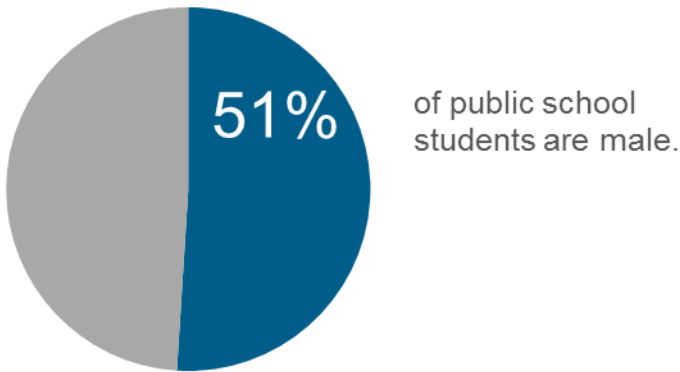


DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
A.J. Drexel

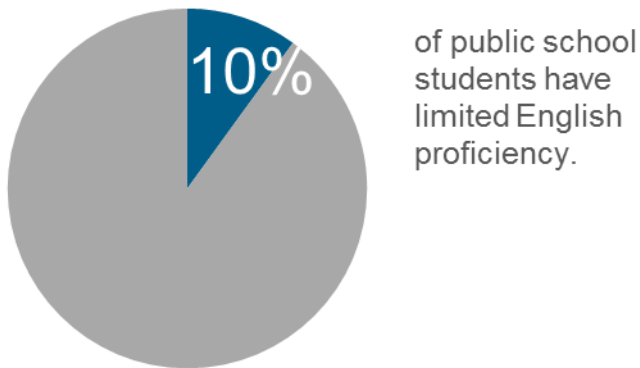
**Autism Institute**

## Characteristics of all public school students

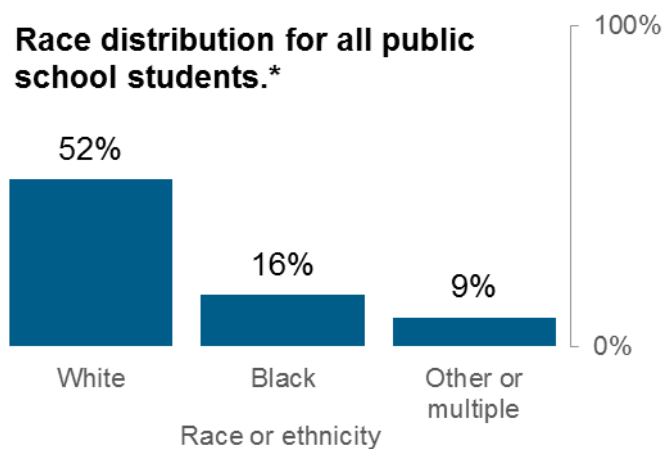
Fifty one percent of all students are male.



Ten percent of students speak English as a second language.



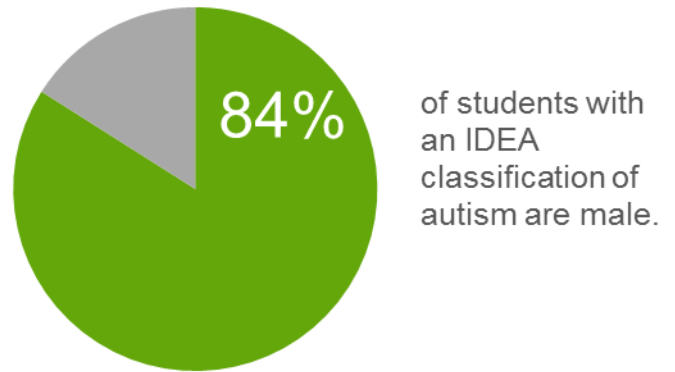
Race distribution for all public school students.\*



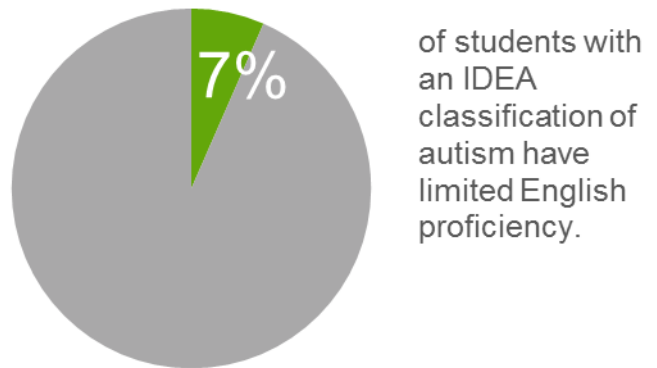
\*When the Office for Civil Rights collects information on students, they consider Hispanic or Latino ethnicity separately from race. So a student can be a race (such as white or black) and Hispanic. Twenty-four percent of students are listed as Hispanic.

## Characteristics of students with ASD

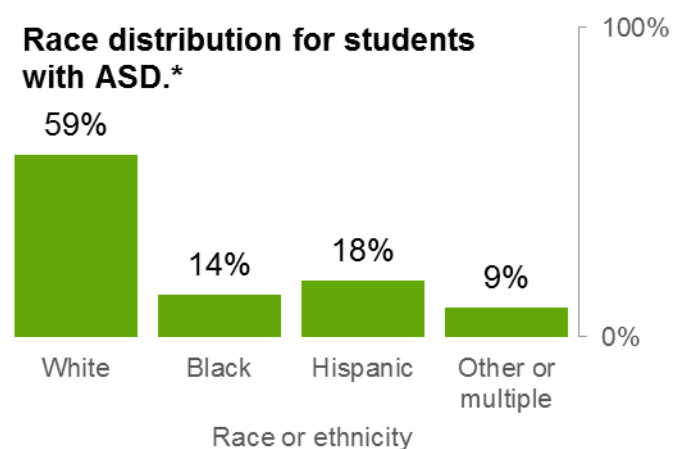
Most students with ASD are male.



Few students with ASD speak English as a second language.

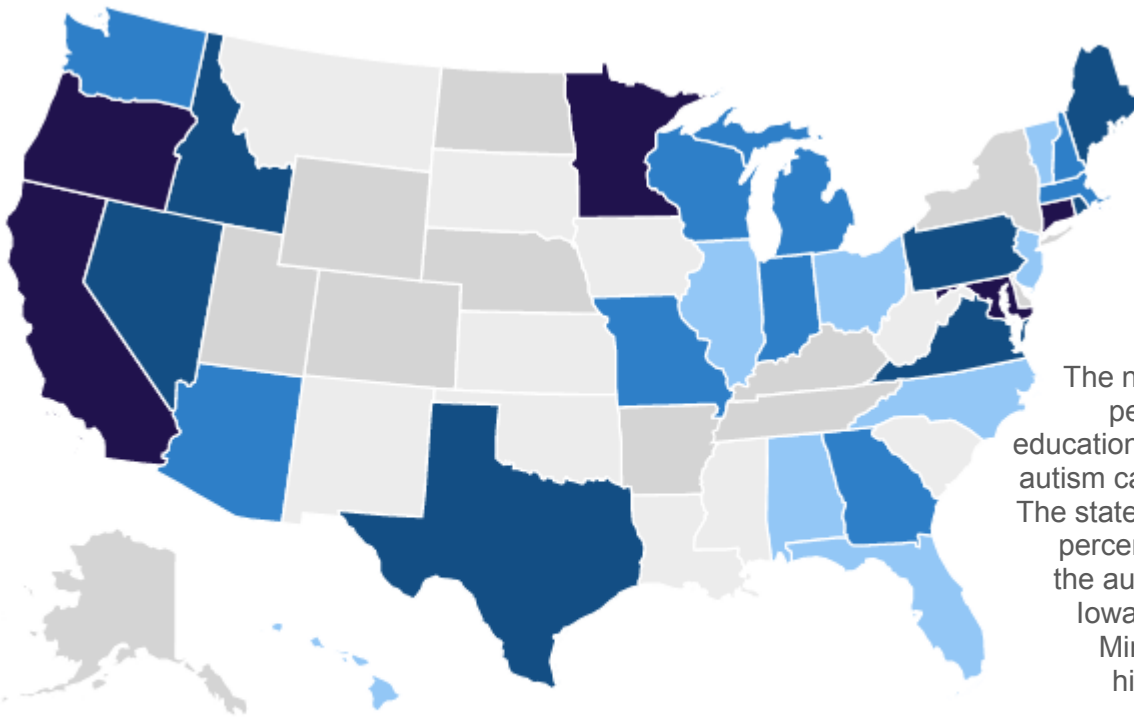


Race distribution for students with ASD.\*

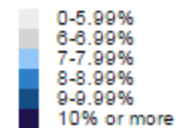


\*IDEA data collection considers Hispanic as a race, not a separate ethnicity.

## Special education students ages 6-21 that are included in the autism category vary by state



The national average percent of special education students in the autism category is 8.3%. The state with the lowest percent of students in the autism category is Iowa with 1.1%, and Minnesota has the highest at 13.8%.



### Why do state differences exist?

IDEA counts of students in the autism category may vary from state to state because “autism” does not have a national, common definition. State Education Agencies (SEAs) create their own definition for each special

education disability category, including autism. IDEA proposes definitions that SEAs may use, but the use of the definitions is not mandated or strictly followed.<sup>2</sup>

### Sources:

1. IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments, (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html> on July 10, 2015.
2. Pennington, M. L., Cullinan, D., & Southern, L. B. (2014). Defining Autism: Variability in State Education Agency Definitions of and Evaluations for Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Autism Research and Treatment*, 2014.

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*The Life Course Outcomes Research Program is building a base of knowledge about the things other than clinical interventions that promote positive outcomes for people on the autism spectrum and their families and communities.*