

National Autism Data Center Fact Sheet Series

Autism and Special Education
Issue 0, December 2015



Life Course Outcomes
Research Program

Special Education and Autism

Who, what, where, why, and when?

Several U.S. federal departments work together to produce information about students with autism who receive special education services. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) requires states to report certain information about public schools and their students, and this information is then compiled nationally. The final product is a count of public school students in each state, along with counts of students with different characteristics. These characteristics include race, gender, age, disability,

test scores, and more. The Office for Civil Rights is then in charge of presenting counts of all public school students by gender, race, and disability status. The Office of Special Education Programs provides more detailed counts for students with disabilities who receive special education.

The provision of special education is mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was first passed in 1975 and most recently reauthorized in 2004.

Special education is specially designed instruction to enable qualified students with a disability to have equal access to the general education curriculum at no cost to the family. IDEA mandates that education and services must be provided to students with disabilities who qualify for special education and also dictates what information must be collected across states about special education students.

Office for Civil Rights

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 U.S. public schools. For example, OCR reports that nearly 50 million students attended public school in the U.S. in 2012. Of those, slightly over six million received special education under IDEA.

Office of Special Education Programs

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) currently identifies 13 special education categories, which include autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and others. Information relating to special education is collected by state on children ages 0-2 for early intervention (IDEA Part C) and school-aged children ages 3-21 (IDEA Part B), including information about educational environment, receipt of transition planning, and how students exited special education. According to IDEA Part B data, in 2013 there were 476,058 students with autism ages 6-21 in the U.S. served under IDEA.



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How does IDEA reporting work?

Each state is in charge of reporting counts on indicators mandated by IDEA. There are 20 indicators that each state must report on, but only the first 12 are required to be reported by disability category. Each state sends this type of information to the DOE, where it is compiled into a national data source with information by state. These counts are then available for public use.

IDEA Part B requires reporting for students ages 3-21 by disability, race, gender, and English proficiency status. Reporting of counts is required for these categories: educational environment, exiting status, school

personnel, disciplinary actions, dispute resolution, school assessment results, maintenance of effort reduction, and coordinated early intervening services.

Each state reports the number of students in each of the required categories by group. For example, in 2013, Pennsylvania reported that 24,270 of the 263,785 special education students in the state ages 6 through 17 were in the autism category. Looking at further categorization, 379 of the students were reported as having Limited English Proficiency.

How do states define autism?

IDEA proposes definitions that states may use for all 13 disability categories including autism. However, many State Education Agencies (SEAs) create their own definition for each special education disability category. The use of the exact IDEA definition is not mandated or strictly adhered to.¹ Therefore, who is included in the IDEA counts of students in the autism category may differ by state because autism definitions vary by state.

What kinds of questions does IDEA answer?

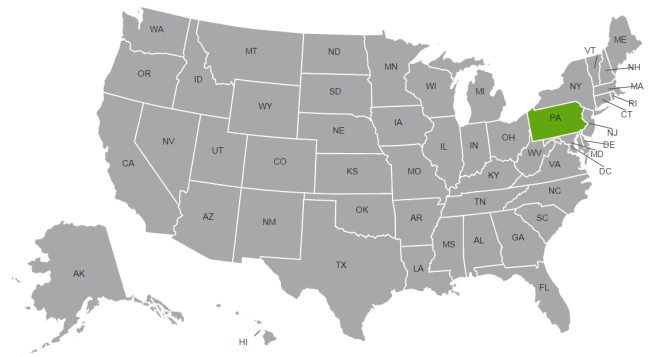
IDEA data provides counts of students in special education and monitors how states are complying with key aspects of federal special education law. The data doesn't reveal anything about individual students in the state; we only know how many students are counted in different categories. For example, we know that there are 24,270 special education students in Pennsylvania with an autism classification and that 379 of them have Limited English Proficiency.

Sometimes we can break information down further, but not always. In our Pennsylvania example, we do not know the race or disciplinary action records of

students with autism who have Limited English Proficiency. Because of this, we can only present percentages of students who have had certain experiences. We cannot draw inferences or connect one experience to another.

We have the ability to compare states on important indicators. We also have the ability to compare students with autism to students with other disabilities. For example, we might compare how much time students with autism

spend in a regular education classroom to how much time students with intellectual disability spend in a regular education classroom.



Sources:

1. Pennington, ML, Cullinan, D, & Southern, LB. (2014). Defining Autism: Variability in State Education Agency Definitions of and Evaluations for Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Autism Research and Treatment*.

How to cite this information: Rast JE, Roux, AM, Shattuck PT. Special Education and Autism. *National Autism Data Center Fact Sheet Series; Autism and Special Education: Issue 0*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015.

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.

