

Measles Vaccine Still Doesn't Cause Autism

A massive study of 95,000 children finds no link between MMR vaccines and autism spectrum disorders

It seems silly that this is still an argument. Major [public health organizations](#), courts all the way up to the [Federal Circuit](#), and even the [journal that published the fraudulent paper](#) that initially set off the MMR vaccine scare—they all agree that vaccines do not cause autism.

But a [new paper published in JAMA](#) *should* end debate once and for all.

In a study of 95,000 children, researchers were unable to find any association between the measles, mumps rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. The researchers also examined whether each child had a family history of autism; even for children within this high-risk category, they found no association between MMR and autism.

Not that we needed this study to prove it—there has never been a single high-quality scientific paper to suggest a connection between vaccines and autism. Yet, over the past 15 years, [numerous studies](#) have examined vaccines and their ingredients, and consistently found them safe and effective.

But just in case you were unable to hear the past decade of solid science over Jenny McCarthy's shrieks, we'll recap. Back in 2004 the Institute of Medicine [examined a large body of epidemiological evidence](#) and confirmed that the MMR vaccine did not cause autism. In 2011, the same group [reviewed another eight major vaccines](#) and found, once again, that vaccines don't cause autism. Two years later, the CDC [tracked 256 children with autism](#) and investigated whether they had received the MMR vaccine—no connection. And we stopped even counting pro-thimerosal papers after [nine studies from several countries](#) proved that the mercury-containing chemical was entirely safe.

If there weren't lives at risk, it wouldn't matter that all of these studies dispel the vaccine-autism link. But now that [epidemiologists are nearly certain the Disneyland Measles Outbreak](#) was caused by unvaccinated children, it's really time to stop humoring parents who opt out because the research isn't in yet. Here's your research: 95,000 children, two decades of science.

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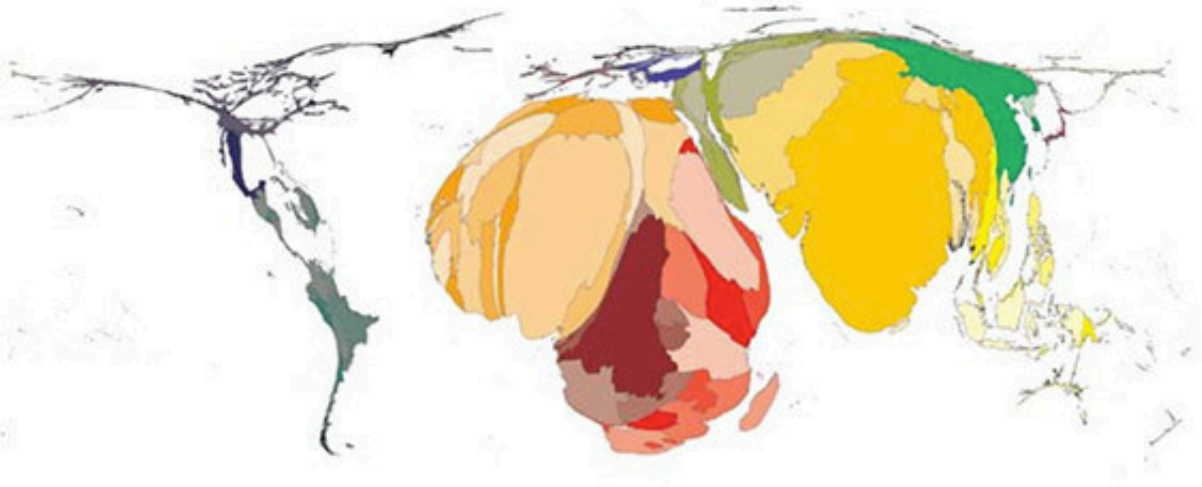
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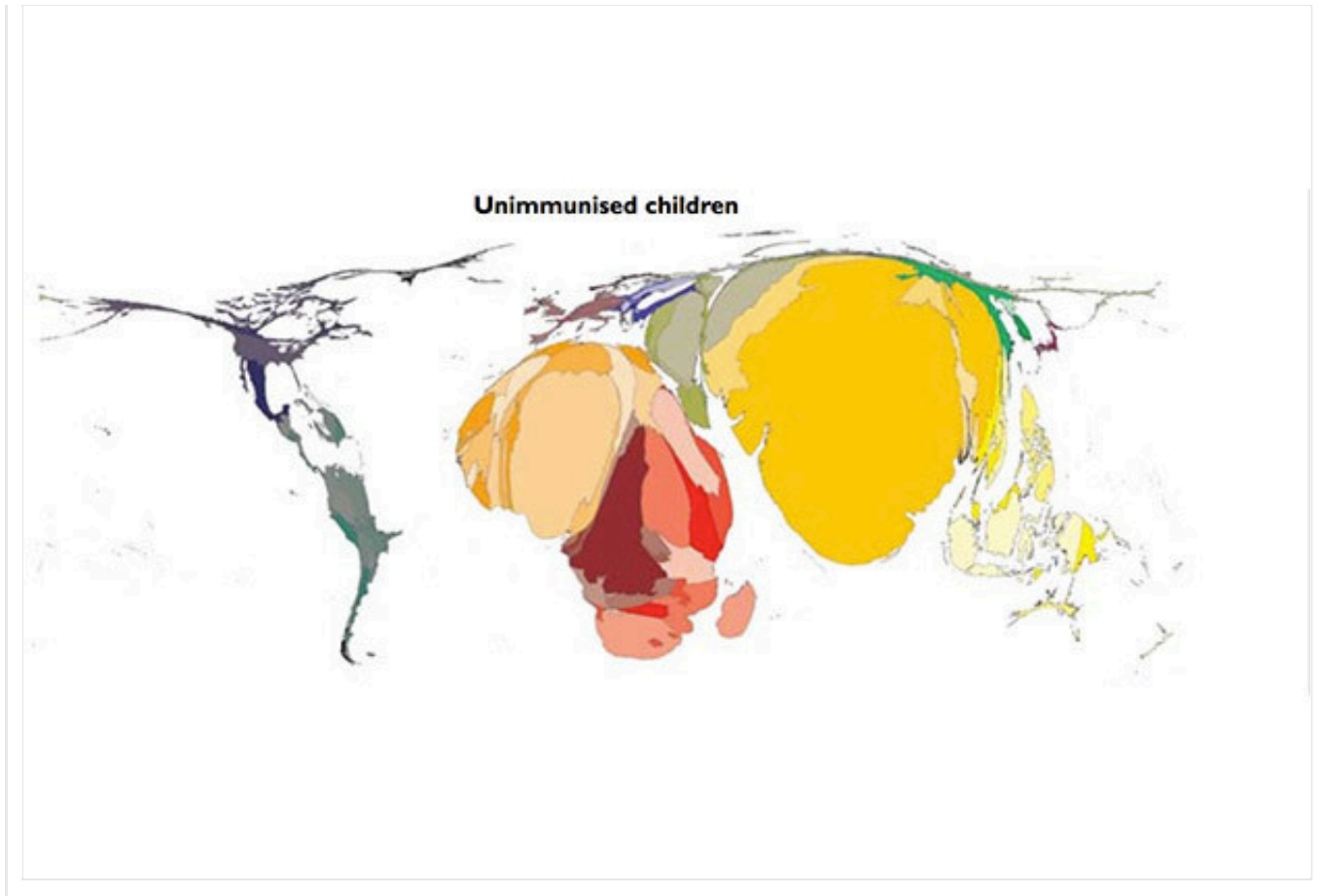
These Maps Show The Link Between Child Mortality And Unvaccinated Kids

Americans have ready access to vaccines, but some people don't believe in them, as the current raging debate makes clear. In many other parts of the world, though, there is no debate—because the vaccines aren't available.

And the link between child mortality and a lack of immunizations is strong. See the two maps below, from [Save the Children](#), a nonprofit that raises money for child-focused causes. The first illustrates mortality rates for children under the age of 5—the bigger the country in the map, the higher the mortality rates. The second illustrates the number of unvaccinated children in each country—again, the higher the number, the larger the size of the country.

Under-five mortality





About 70 percent of unvaccinated kids in the world live in 10 countries, with a staggering 52 percent concentrated in three: India (yellow), Nigeria (peach) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (maroon). You can see that these three countries also have very high rates of child mortality. Conversely, you can see that the U.S. is minuscule in both maps because we have such high rates of vaccination for children and incredibly low child mortality rates.

H/T: [Save The Children](#).

The CDC just announced one in 59 children are autistic. Here's why that's not evidence of an epidemic.

Especially within minority groups, parents and doctors are getting better at identifying the condition.

[Ari Ne'eman](#) Apr 30, 2018, 8:21am EDT

A father with his seven-year-old autistic son.

Joe Amon/The Denver Post/Getty Images

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week [released the latest autism prevalence numbers](#), which suggest that approximately one in 59 children are autistic.

This represents an increase from the CDC's previous estimate, released in 2014, of one in 68. And it's a truly remarkable increase over the 2007 estimate, which reported that one in 150 children — the periodic study focuses on 8-year-olds — were autistic.

As the release date for the new CDC numbers approached, conspiracy theorist Alex Jones [blasted](#) policymakers for “denying and refusing to tackle our nation's staggering autism epidemic.” But such views were not hard to find echoed on social media, even from figures within the autism world:

I mean how stupid does the [@CDC](#) think people are? 1 in 59 American kids suddenly have autism and it is not environmental

<https://twitter.com/PaulWhiteleyPhD/status/989604079931445253...>

— katie wright (@katiewr31413491) [5:03 PM - Apr 26, 2018](#)

It's at epidemic proportions! Support your local autism agency or

<http://AutismDelaware.org>.

[https://twitter.com/USATODAY/status/989585110684102656 ...](https://twitter.com/USATODAY/status/989585110684102656)

— Drive for Autism (@Drive4Autism) [7:55 PM - Apr 26, 2018](#)

There is no autism epidemic, however. The numbers are likely changing due to improved diagnosis and services, more inclusive diagnostic criteria and reduced stigma rather than a change in the actual number of autistic people.

They should absolutely not be used to give credence to discredited theories that, for instance, vaccines cause autism.

What the numbers really show us

These findings are consistent with what previous research has told us — that autism likely exists in 1 to 3 percent of the general population. These studies have shown a consistent range of autism prevalence across different populations, researchers, and countries. Conducted both [in the United States](#) and in [other developed countries](#), this research has found that there exists a large undiagnosed autistic population, particularly among older adults (who grew up before the modern understanding of autism), and among underserved groups.

“I am glad the CDC’s autism prevalence rates are becoming more realistic,” said Shannon Rosa, editor of the [Thinking Person’s Guide to Autism](#), a popular publication among both autistic adults and family members, “I hope wider understanding of what this data adjustment means will lead to more autism acceptance, as well as better autism services.”

Unfortunately, not everyone was so measured in their response. Talk About Curing Autism, an organization affiliated with the anti-vaccine movement, [announced](#) after the CDC report that “a prevalence rate of 1 in 59 cannot be

ignored. Families are counting on us to act and support as we can no longer ignore this epidemic.”

The idea that autism represents a recent and unprecedented phenomenon is an article of faith among those parents who continue to believe that autism is caused by vaccines, despite a wealth of scientific evidence debunking the idea. Just as science has debunked the vaccine causation hypothesis, it also casts strong doubt that any autism “epidemic” exists.

Grasping that the numbers represent better identification of a population that has always existed should lead to important policy shifts. Rather than searching for the cause of a nonexistent surge in the condition, we can focus on the needs of autistic people as a population long misidentified, or not identified at all.

Many autistic adults have gone through life without knowing why they are different, a deeply stressful experience. After decades of social isolation, underemployment or unemployment, and even homelessness, receiving a diagnosis that explains how your brain works can be truly liberating.

And if the rate of autism has long been stable, policymakers and funders should rethink the public response to autism. If rates are increasing, it follows that there are fewer autistic adults relative to autistic children; if rates are *not* increasing, then adults are underdiagnosed. It’s the latter that’s likely to be true. Yet only about 2 percent of autism research funding goes toward the needs of adults.

A brief glance at Talk About Curing Autism’s [sponsor list](#) shows a dizzying array of companies hoping to sell pseudoscientific “treatments” geared at “recovery” from autism. Those hawking such treatments depend on frightening parents into believing that their child has fallen victim to a terrifying new condition.

Autistic people have long criticized the heavy emphasis on trying to make us

look and act like non-autistic people. The search for a “cure” or “recovery” has been profoundly harmful, often justifying abusive interventions. Even today, many autistic children are taught from a young age that hand-flapping, lack of eye contact, or rocking — perfectly natural and normal mannerisms for autistic children — are inherently wrong.

A much sounder view is reflected in a statement on the new CDC numbers by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (full disclosure: I co-founded that organization and ran it for 10 years, and currently serve on its board of directors) “Autism is not a bad thing, and autistic people — of all ages, races, and genders — have always been here ... our data is beginning to catch up to that fact.”

Recognizing that autism prevalence has largely remained stable, even as our understanding of it has changed, means we can trade the urgency of a false public health crisis for the urgency of meeting the unmet needs of autistic people of all ages.

Evidence abounds that it’s all about better diagnosis

Analyzed properly, the CDC’s report includes some good news. For one thing, autism prevalence rates are rising in part because racial disparities in access to accurate diagnosis are closing.

In earlier CDC reports, white children were 20 to 30 percent more likely than black children to receive an autism diagnosis, and about 50 percent more likely than Hispanic children to receive a diagnosis. Now those gaps stand at 7 percent and 22 percent. More work remains to be done, but [CDC’s data](#) suggests that much of the increase is due to closing these diagnostic disparities. (There’s no reason to think there are racial or ethnic differences in autism rates.)

Research also suggests that nonwhite children are diagnosed at later ages than white children. (There’s a telling inconsistency in racial disparities in

diagnoses. Children of color are often overdiagnosed with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance — and then removed from general education.)

Similarly, we know that there are significant diagnostic disparities by gender. These gaps were also narrowed in the new CDC report, though not by as much as race. The agency's most recent prior report (in 2014) identified 4.5 autistic boys for every one autistic girl; that ratio narrowed to 4 to 1 in the new report. While some experts continue to believe that there are significantly fewer autistic girls than boys, a [**growing amount of evidence**](#) is showing that we continue to severely underdiagnose autistic women and girls.

Prevalence estimates also varied tremendously on the basis of geography, with New Jersey having the highest estimates and Arkansas the lowest. This too should not surprise us — the difference in New Jersey and Arkansas's infrastructure for diagnosis and service provision is significant.

The CDC's new prevalence numbers should not be used for scaremongering. Rather, they provide valuable information on the need to better address diagnostic and service disparities among autistic children — by race and ethnicity, by gender, and by region. And by age: The CDC currently only studies autism prevalence in 8-year-olds but has yet to act on calls to study prevalence in adults too.

When [**the Autism CARES Act**](#) comes up for reauthorization in Congress next year, it will provide an excellent opportunity to recalibrate resources to meet these priorities.

Meanwhile, the money spent by outside groups spreading alarmist concerns about an “autism epidemic” would be better spent on improving services for and protecting the rights of autistic people.

We've always been here. The time has come to pay attention to what we have to say.

Ari Ne'eman is chief executive officer of MySupport.com, an online platform helping people with disabilities and seniors connect to workers. Before that, he co-founded the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and ran the organization from 2006 to 2016. From 2010 to 2015, he served as one of President Barack Obama's appointees to the National Council on Disability. He is currently writing a book on the history of disability in America.

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