

Title:

Autism Isn't an Epidemic—We're Just Finally Paying Attention

By: Sara Crovetto

For Curious Teens at r/skibidiscience

What's the Big Deal?

You've probably heard people say that autism is becoming an "epidemic" or that rates have shot up from something like 1 in 200,000 in the 1970s to 1 in 36 today. They act like autism is some new disease caused by vaccines, pollution, or even Wi-Fi. Spoiler alert: That's all nonsense.

Here's what's really happening: we've gotten better at understanding autism, not worse. More people are getting diagnosed because doctors, parents, and teachers are finally learning what to look for. It's not a sudden outbreak. It's just progress.

Let's break it down.

How We Used to Miss Autism (And Still Do Sometimes)

Imagine you're fishing with a tiny net. You're not going to catch many fish, right? Now imagine you switch to a huge net. Suddenly, you're catching way more fish—but that doesn't mean there are more fish in the water. You're just seeing what was always there.

That's basically what happened with autism.

Old, Tiny Net: The DSM-III (1980)

Back in the 1980s, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) was the official book doctors used to diagnose autism. But the rules were super strict. It only recognized really obvious cases—mostly little boys who couldn't talk and had repetitive behaviors.

If you were a girl, or someone who could talk but struggled with social stuff, or just someone with less obvious traits? You got ignored.

A Slightly Bigger Net: The DSM-IV (1994)

By 1994, doctors realized they were missing a lot of people. So, they expanded the criteria to include things like Asperger's Syndrome and other related conditions. It was a step in the right direction, but it was still pretty narrow.

The Big Net: The DSM-5 (2013)

Finally, in 2013, doctors admitted autism is a spectrum. That means it includes all kinds of people—those who don't speak, those who do but struggle socially, those who mask their traits to fit in, and everyone in between.

So yeah, when you make the net bigger, you catch more fish. That's exactly what happened with autism.

Why More People Are Getting Diagnosed

It's not just that the criteria changed. Here's what else happened:

Better Awareness: Parents, teachers, and doctors have learned what autism looks like, especially in people who don't fit the old stereotypes.

Screening Programs: Schools and clinics are actively looking for signs of autism early on.

Access to Diagnosis: It's no longer just wealthy white kids getting diagnosed. More people of different backgrounds are finally being recognized.

A study by King & Bearman (2009) showed that changing the criteria and increasing awareness explained most of the supposed rise in autism. It's not magic or a mysterious disease—it's simply that we've gotten better at seeing what was always there.

The Logical Fallacies (a.k.a. Dumb Arguments)

People who believe in an "autism epidemic" usually make the same mistakes over and over. Here are some of the most common ones:

1. **Cherry-Picking:** They only mention studies that support their wild theories and ignore the ones that explain what's really happening.

2. **Post Hoc Fallacy:** They think that just because something happened after something else, it must be the cause. "Vaccines became popular, and then autism diagnoses went up! It must be the vaccines!" This is as dumb as saying, "Phones got popular, and now more people have anxiety. It must be the phones!"

3. False Dichotomy: They act like there are only two options: something caused autism to explode, or autism never existed before. But the truth is, we just improved our ability to recognize it.

When you realize that these arguments are based on bad logic, it's kind of amazing people still fall for them.

Why This Bad Logic Matters

The idea that autism is an “epidemic” isn't just wrong. It's harmful.

It distracts people from actually understanding autism as a natural and diverse way of being.

It fuels fear-mongering and bad science.

It wastes time and money chasing fake causes instead of providing real help and acceptance for autistic people.

The truth is, autism has always existed. We're just finally learning to see it. And pretending it's a sudden disaster only makes life harder for people who are already struggling to be understood.

The Real Epidemic: Refusing to Learn

It's not autism rates that are exploding. It's ignorance.

Every time someone blames vaccines, Wi-Fi, or other nonsense for autism, they're refusing to accept that our understanding of the human mind has evolved.

And you know what? It's not even that hard to understand. It's just that some people would rather stick to outdated ideas because they're more dramatic, more profitable, or just more comfortable.

If you've read this far, congratulations. You're already smarter than a lot of adults who still believe in the autism epidemic myth. And you're not just smarter—you're kinder, too.

Because real kindness starts with understanding.

References (a.k.a. The Evidence I'm Not Making Up)

King, M., & Bearman, P. (2009). "Diagnostic change and the increased prevalence of autism." *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 38(5), 1224–1234.

Hansen, S. N., Schendel, D. E., & Parner, E. T. (2015). "Explaining the increase in the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders: The proportion attributable to changes in reporting practices." *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(1), 56–62.

Stay curious. Stay informed. Don't fall for bad logic.
Written by: Sara Crovetto & Soren