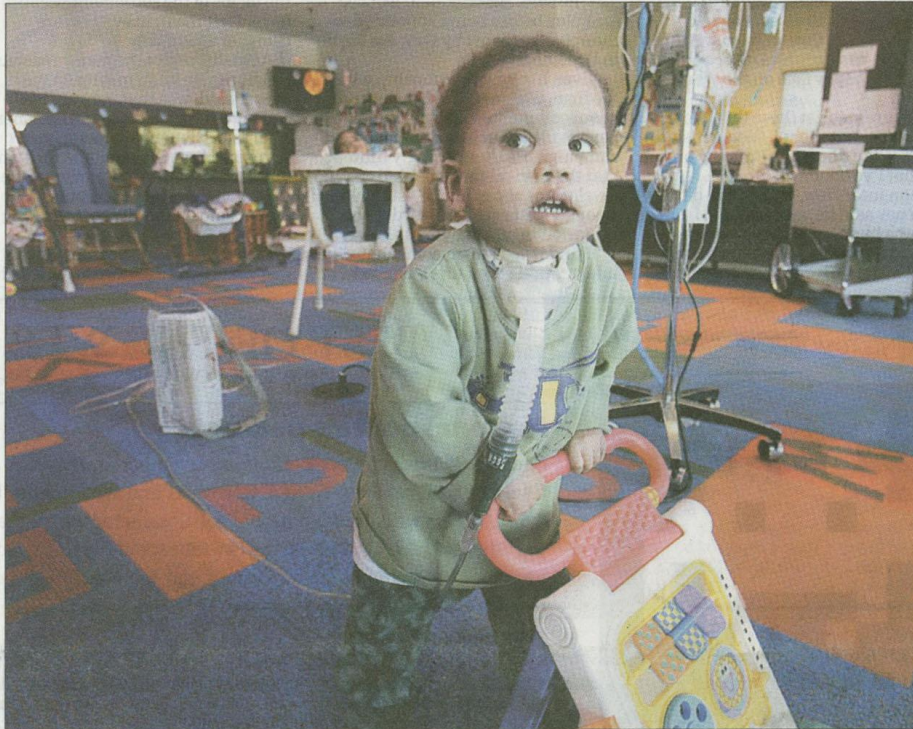


More children in area being diagnosed with disabilities, study says

Young and in need



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John Burks, 2, cruises around at his day care at the Milwaukee Center for Independence on Wednesday. The day care is for children with serious medical issues. John had a tracheostomy and receives oxygen through a tube in his trachea.

Some say findings should spur cooperation among agencies

By **DANI McCLAIN**
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The number of children with disabilities in southeastern Wisconsin is growing at an alarming rate, according to a study by the nonprofit Milwaukee Center for Independence that also estimates the costs associated with their education and care.

Of the nearly 30,000 children born in the seven-county region each year, about 2,700 will develop a lifetime disability, the study says. The costs associat-

ed with their care throughout their lifetimes are estimated at \$15 billion, including residential care, medical, education, and home and vehicle adaptation costs.

"This is a problem that not only exists, but is growing," said Howard Garber, the organization's president. "There has been no recognition of the growth in the incidence of disability, for whatever the cause."

Milwaukee Center for Independence, a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities, wants to spur better coordination among organizations that serve the region's special needs children and eventually create a one-stop diagnostic center for affected fami-

Rate of special needs students growing

The population of special needs students grew by more than 3% in the region, while overall enrollment increased by only 0.5%.

Percentage change of schoolchildren with a disability by county (between 2000-'01 and 2003-'04)

County	Percentage Change
Milwaukee	+1.14%
Kenosha	+6.16
Ozaukee	+9.26
Racine	+7.78
Walworth	+16.48
Washington	-2.39
Waukesha	+2.93
Total	+3.26
Overall enrollment	+0.51

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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2,700 number of children born in the region each year who will develop a disability

\$15 billion lifetime cost of their care

68% increase in autism among public school children in southeastern Wisconsin between 2000-'01 and 2003-'04

1 of 3 children in Milwaukee in 2005 lived with a family in poverty

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DISABILITIES

Rise in diagnoses reported

lies.

The study says the number of children with a disability increased 3.3% between 2000-'01 and 2003-'04. The report highlights poverty and related issues, such as poor prenatal care, premature births, lead poisoning and birth defects associated with substance abuse as top reasons why many Milwaukee-area children are both born with disabilities and diagnosed with disabling conditions later in childhood.

Among the report's other findings:

■ The population of public school children in southeastern Wisconsin with autism jumped nearly 68% between 2000-'01 and 2003-'04. Students diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury increased 30%, and reports of significant developmental delay increased 20%.

■ Nearly a quarter of children in Milwaukee County have special health care needs, a federal designation that includes disabilities such as cerebral palsy, leukemia, diabetes, autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and severe asthma.

The national and state averages are around 13%.

■ The number of public school children with disabilities in Walworth County increased by 16.5% between 2000-'01 and 2003-'04.

The agency's report — released this month — titled "Children with Disabilities: A Hidden Health Care Crisis," compiles data from several agencies, including the state Department of Health and Family Services, the Center for Population Health at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, the state Department of Public Instruction, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Economic Policy Institute.

The findings should serve as a call to arms, urging community-based providers to better coordinate available services, said Garber, a developmental psychologist and professor of health sciences at UW-Milwaukee.

"We're not seeking to reinvent existing care systems, nor are we seeking additional funding," the report says. "We want to organize existing systems in a way that is more effective."

But the organization's long-term plan is to create a regional diagnostic, treatment and resource center for children with disabilities. The Milwaukee County Board and state Legislature have passed resolutions endorsing the report's findings and urging Gov. Jim Doyle to convene a task force to identify funding for a kind of one-stop shop for local families.



Shamena Scruggs, a certified nurse and child care teacher, plays with Timothy Allen, 1, at Pediatric Special Care. Timothy has a seizure disorder.

Cathy Steffke, an advocate with Disability Rights Wisconsin, said she hopes the report spurs a collaborative effort like the Milwaukee County Mental Health Task Force created in 2003.

"You need everyone to sit at a table, not fight over dollars, and figure out a way to get it done," said Steffke, who hadn't seen the new report. "If Children's (Hospital) is doing this and MPS is doing this and Penfield is doing this and the Center for Independence is doing that and nobody coordinates, money slips through the cracks."

One out of three school-age children in the city lived with a family in poverty in 2005, according to U.S. census numbers.

"Many of the low-income kids are at greater risk for unintended injuries as well as intended injuries," said Earnestine Willis, director of the Center for the Advancement of Underserved Children at the Medical College of Wisconsin. "Our social support system for children is definitely weak."

Poor children are at greater risk for abuse and gunshot wounds, and are more likely to have lead poisoning or be born prematurely, Willis said.

Babies born prematurely are at high risk for several complications, such as lung, heart or brain problems. The babies may also have learning disabilities and developmental problems.

In nearly two decades at

the Milwaukee Center for Independence, Garber has expanded services for special needs youths, including a program that serves children up to 3 with developmental delays, a charter school through UW-Milwaukee, a job training program with MPS and a pediatric special care program.

The organization has an annual budget of \$48 million and serves up to 12,000 people a year. But many service gaps remain for area families, according to the report.

After-school programs, summer camps, parent training and help with the post-high school transition are among the services that families struggle to find, it concludes.

And while federally mandated early childhood pro-

U.S. Census Bureau Data

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grams and 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten help with early identification, more is needed to help parents find the resources they need, Garber said.

Spending dollars on early detection and treatment is more cost-effective than addressing a disabled adult's lack of job skills or increased likelihood of ending up in prison, Garber said. U.S. Census Bureau statistics indicate that at least 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed.

"This is an investment that may take 15 to 20 years to unfold," he said. "Do something now or pay the cost later."

Kawanza Newson of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.



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Gay Fuller (left) an LPN, and Jessica Gennrich, an RN, play with John Burks, 2, on Wednesday at the Milwaukee Center for Independence's Pediatric Special Care. The facility is a day care for children with serious medical issues. John had a tracheostomy and receives oxygen through a tube in his trachea.

Poverty, disabilities linked

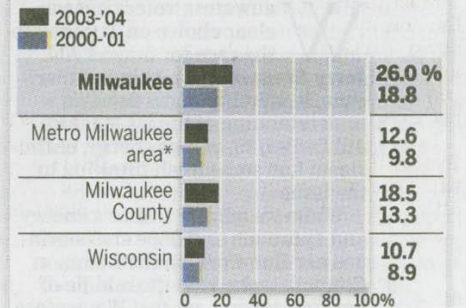
As poverty rates have increased in southeastern Wisconsin, so has the incidence of disabilities affecting area schoolchildren.

Public schoolchildren with a disability in the seven-county region that includes Milwaukee

Disability	2003-'04	Percentage increase since 2000-'01
Autism	1,582	67.73%
Significant development delay	1,186	20.26
Traumatic brain injury	176	30.46
Visual impairment	220	22.20
*Other health impairment	4,569	51.84

*"Other health impairments" is a special education label that includes everything from epilepsy to diabetes to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to lead poisoning.

Percentage of individuals living in poverty



* Metro Milwaukee is Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis

Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and