# Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s autism comments spark expert criticism and concern



Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the newly confirmed secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), has drawn significant criticism for his recent statements on autism, made during his first news conference as the government's top healthcare official. Kennedy characterised the rise in autism cases as an “alarming … epidemic,” a portrayal that has been challenged by scientific experts and advocacy groups, who argue that his claims misrepresent established research and the findings of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The controversy centres on Kennedy’s assertion that autism’s rising prevalence cannot be explained by improved diagnoses or broadening definitions, which contrasts sharply with decades of scientific understanding. The CDC’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network report, which Kennedy cited, estimates that about one in 31 children born in 2014 were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a higher rate than in previous years. However, the report emphasises factors such as expanded screening programmes, more inclusive diagnostic criteria, and better access to diagnostic services as key contributors to the increased prevalence.

According to the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), Kennedy’s depiction of autism as a “preventable” epidemic disregards the data and fosters misinformation. Speaking out against his claims, ASAN stated that Kennedy “cherry-picked” data and misinterpreted basic science, stressing that autism prevalence changes reflect increased access to diagnosis rather than a true surge in incidence.

Holden Thorp, editor of the scientific journal Science and an individual diagnosed with autism in adulthood, echoed this view, noting that “almost everything in the CDC report talked about better identification and better diagnosis being the source of the increase,” and pointed out the report’s “main recommendation is to get people more access to services.”

Kennedy further stated that “most cases now are severe,” a claim contradicted by recent studies showing that the proportion of severe cases, characterised by intellectual disabilities and stereotypical behaviours, has actually declined in recent years. Moreover, he criticised what he called “epidemic denial” by media and scientists, alleging an industry-led conspiracy to ignore environmental causes—which he suggests include “toxins” introduced through medicines infancy, strongly implying childhood vaccinations.

Kennedy’s statements about autism’s impact on individuals and families were also contested. He portrayed autistic people as largely incapable of typical life activities, saying, “These are kids who will never pay taxes, never hold a job, they’ll never play baseball, they’ll never write a poem, they’ll never go out on a date, many of them will never use a toilet unassisted.” This portrayal was met with criticism from autism advocates who assert that many autistic people lead diverse and productive lives, participating in work, social relationships, creative pursuits, and independent living.

Further scientific research underscores the complexity of autism, identifying genetic factors and prenatal brain development anomalies linked to ASD. Although some environmental influences during pregnancy have been explored, these are regarded as contributing factors rather than primary causes. The CDC report noted that increases in diagnoses among Black, Hispanic, and other ethnic groups reflect expanded access to screening and diagnosis, a development that has reduced previous disparities tied to socioeconomic status.

State-level variations in autism diagnosis rates, such as the contrast between Texas and California, are also attributed to differences in screening practices and early intervention efforts. California’s more proactive approach, with paediatricians trained to assess children as young as 36 months, correlates with higher reported prevalence rates compared to Texas, where average diagnosis occurs closer to 70 months.

Kennedy’s comments have sparked concerns regarding his understanding of autism and his approach as HHS secretary. Critics worry his emphasis on “environmental toxins” as causative factors could divert resources and attention from ongoing research and services aimed at enhancing the lives of autistic individuals and their families.

Emily Hotez, a prominent autism researcher at UCLA, commented following the CDC’s report release that the drive to determine the cause of autism should not overshadow the “something far more urgent: improving the lives of autistic people and their families, here and now.”

In summary, while Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has positioned himself as committed to scientific inquiry, his recent remarks on autism spectrum disorder challenge established research and have been met with significant pushback from experts and advocacy groups, highlighting ongoing debates regarding autism’s prevalence, causes, and societal impact.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/fact-checking-robert-f-kennedy-jr-s-statements-on-autism> - This article corroborates the controversy surrounding Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s statements on autism, highlighting his portrayal of autism as an 'individual tragedy,' and how medical experts and autism advocates found his depiction skewed.
2. <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Wellness/parents-experts-react-rfk-jrs-autism-claims/story?id=120911306> - This news piece documents the backlash from parents and experts against Kennedy's claims about autism, specifically regarding his views on vaccines and environmental causes, which they consider to spread misinformation.
3. <https://www.hhs.gov/press-room/hhs-secretary-kennedy-press-conference-cdc-data-autism-epidemic.html> - This press release from HHS confirms Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s press conference addressing the CDC's latest data on autism, reflecting his active engagement with the topic.
4. <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2025/04/asan-gravely-concerned-by-administrations-plans-for-autistic-peoples-medical-data/> - This page from the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) reflects concerns about the administration's plans for autistic people, aligning with broader concerns about Kennedy's portrayal of autism.
5. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide data indicating that the rise in autism diagnoses is attributed to improved diagnostic techniques and expanded screening, contrary to Kennedy's claims about an 'epidemic.'
6. <https://health.ucsd.edu/ucsdnews/Release.aspx?id=28985> - Although this specific URL is not available, research from various universities supports the notion that while some environmental factors are explored in autism research, genetic factors play a significant role, aligning with critiques of Kennedy's views.
7. <https://www.westhawaiitoday.com/2025/04/28/opinion/rfk-jr-s-views-on-autism-show-that-anti-science-myths-are-rampant-at-the-agency-he-leads/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data