

Children with Special Needs

DEFINITION

Children with special needs are those who have a chronic disease or disability that requires educational services, health care and/or related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally. Special needs can be physical, developmental, behavioral and/or emotional. This indicator measures the number of children enrolled in Early Intervention, special education, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medical Assistance (when the child is eligible due to special health care needs) in 2004.

SIGNIFICANCE

As many as 18% of children nationwide have a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral or emotional condition that requires health care and related services.¹ Some chronic and disabling conditions among children include mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, asthma, autism, hearing impairment, communication disorders, seizure disorders and congenital diseases.^{2,3}

Children with special needs are a heterogeneous group, varying by the type and severity of the chronic disease or disability. Needs vary based on the age of the child, as well as by the many differences in the population at large – such as family income, race, ethnicity, primary language and parents’

educational level.⁴ Children with chronic or disabling conditions are likely to have functional limitations or impairments in physical, social, emotional or behavioral functioning in comparison with their peers of the same age.⁵ In Rhode Island, youth with special needs are much less likely than their non-disabled peers to finish high school, go on to postsecondary education, find employment, earn an adequate wage and live independently.⁶

There are some issues of common concern to families of children with chronic or disabling conditions. Whether disabilities are mild or severe, they have the potential to create special needs related to physical health, mental health, education, family support, child care, recreation and career preparation. For many parents, having a child with special needs has a significant impact on their finances, their jobs and their family lives.^{7,8}

Children with special needs require access to services that are appropriate to their individualized health, education and social-emotional needs in order to reach their full potential and minimize the likelihood of life-long dependence.^{9,10} Some children with disabilities may require costly therapeutic and health care services, wheelchairs, assistive technology or home modifications which may result in serious financial burdens on families.¹¹



Children Enrolled in Early Intervention

- ◆ States are required to provide appropriate Early Intervention services to all children from birth to age 3 who are developmentally delayed or have been diagnosed with a physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay.¹²
- ◆ In 2004, the seven certified Early Intervention providers in Rhode Island served 2,870 children ages birth to three.¹³
- ◆ In 2004, 58% of children in Early Intervention programs had significant developmental delays, i.e. physical, cognitive, behavioral and/or emotional delays of unknown medical origin, 25% had a single established condition affecting development, such as cerebral palsy and 6% had multiple established conditions.¹⁴



Children Enrolled in Special Education

- ◆ Local school systems are responsible for identifying and evaluating students ages 3 to 21 whom they have reason to believe are students with disabilities and therefore might require special education and related services.
- ◆ In Rhode Island during the 2003-2004 school year, there were 32,925 public school children enrolled in special education, 21% of the public school student population. Forty-three percent of children in special education in Rhode Island have a learning disability.¹⁵
- ◆ Early Intervention programs are required to provide transition services for children who may be eligible for Special Education at age 3. In 2004, 594 (73%) of the 812 children who reached age 3 while in Early Intervention were referred to Special Education.¹⁶ During the 2003-2004 school year, there were 2,963 children ages 3 to 5 who were not yet in kindergarten receiving Special Education services in Rhode Island public schools.¹⁷



Medical Assistance Coverage for Children with Special Health Care Needs

- ◆ Children who meet certain disability criteria are eligible for Medicaid and/or cash assistance through the federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program.¹⁸ As of December 31, 2004, there were 5,382 Rhode Island children under the age of 21 receiving Medical Assistance benefits because of their enrollment in SSI.¹⁹
- ◆ In Rhode Island, the Katie Beckett eligibility provision provides Medical Assistance coverage to certain children who have serious disabling conditions, in order to enable them to be cared for at home instead of in an institution. As of December 31, 2004, there were 1,462 Rhode Island children under the age of 21 enrolled in Medical Assistance because of eligibility through the Katie Beckett provision.²⁰
- ◆ It is estimated that 14% of Rhode Island children ages 0 to 17 have special health care needs. Twenty-three percent of all households in Rhode Island include a child with at least one special health care need. The prevalence increases with age: 8% of children under the age of 5, 16% of children ages 6 to 11 years, and 18% of children 12 to 17 have special health care needs.²¹
- ◆ A higher percentage of children in low-income families in Rhode Island have special health care needs compared to those in the U.S., with 17% of Rhode Island children in families with incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty threshold reporting special health care needs, compared with 14% nationally.²²

References

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Children in the Child Welfare System

United States

- ◆ Forty-seven percent of U.S. children ages 6 to 11 who are in foster care and 40% of those ages 12 to 14 have a clinical level of behavior and emotional problems. The rate of emotional and behavioral problems among children between the ages of 6 and 14 who live in foster care is approximately four times that of other children.²³
- ◆ More than half of young children in foster care experience serious physical problems and over half experience developmental delays. This is four to five times the rates of developmental delay found among children in the general population.²⁴
- ◆ Twenty-four percent of U.S. children under age 15 who live in foster care have chronic health problems, including 30% of those under age 6. Nearly one third (30%) under the age of 15 have a disability.²⁵

Rhode Island

- ◆ Children who are adopted through the Department of Children, Youth and Families and have special needs may qualify for adoption subsidies, including Medical Assistance. As of December 31, 2004, 2,554 children were receiving Medical Assistance because of special needs adoptions. In addition, 2,284 children in foster care were enrolled in Medical Assistance due to their foster care status.²⁶