SPOTTED

Spotted: Crucial count; animal anxiolytics

BY **KATIE MOISSE**

22 MAY 2015

WEEK OF MAY 18TH

Prevalence puzzle

Are American children more susceptible to severe mental illness now than in the past? It depends whom you ask. A new study suggests the proportion of young people with the poorest mental health has **declined over the past decade**. The findings, published yesterday in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, **contradict figures from national surveys** indicating that more children than ever have mental health problems. “The finding is robust and real and challenges the prevailing stereotype that young people are somehow more vulnerable to mental problems,” **Mark Olfson**, professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University, told *The New York Times.*

Crucial count

If you think the U.S. is home to a lot of people on the spectrum, look at China. Millions of people with autism almost certainly reside in the world’s most populous country. The problem is, no one until now has even tried to count them, according to an article published this week in *The Wall Street Journal*. Two large-scale studies of children in 19 Chinese cities **are underway,** however. The numbers from these studies should shed light on the **prevalence** of autism in China, where research and services lag far behind those in the U.S.

Animal anxiolytics

Social situations can be stressful for children with autism. But new research suggests a simple source of comfort: animals. Scientists measured electrical conductance in the skin of children with autism as they played with peers. This conductance reflects the amount of sweat they produce — a surrogate for stress. The researchers found that children with autism show more stress in these situations than children without the disorder. But that stress seems to drop — reflected in a

43-percent decrease in skin conductance — **when guinea pigs are in the room.** The findings, published last month in *Developmental Psychiatry,* suggest animals can act as 'social buffers' for children with autism, helping to reduce their anxiety in social situations.

Social change

When **Yoav Gilad** found what he considered a fatal flaw in a **2014 comparison of the mouse and human genomes**, he took to Twitter. Gilad, professor of human genetics at the University of Chicago, **posted his results** and invited fellow geneticists to respond in the form of 140-character tweets. Gilad's tactic departs radically from the scientific tradition of funneling controversial findings through a lengthy publication process. A news article published Wednesday in *Nature* highlights how **social media is changing the landscape of research**. "The post drew attention to something that could have been overlooked," **Lior Pachter**, computational biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, told the magazine. Thanks to platforms like Twitter, "you can crowdsource discussion and analysis. I think that's very healthy for science."