

Special Olympics Demographics Research

[SUMMARY PAGE](#)

PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) comprise approximately 1% of the global population. The prevalence of ID varies widely, for example the prevalence in low income countries is 1.5 times that in high income countries.¹ While some research is available, little is known about people with ID. Oftentimes, national monitoring systems (e.g. government censuses and household surveys) provide basic information on different populations. Yet, a study assessing 131 monitoring systems of 12 countries around the world found that less than 25% of these systems tracked people with ID.² **Thus, left unmeasured and uncounted it can be difficult to determine the status of people with ID for crucial issues that affect quality of life, such as employment, health care, and income level.** As one of the largest organizations focused on people with ID globally, Special Olympics seeks to understand the demographics of its athletes (e.g. where they live, gender, age, etc.), as well as the demographics of supporters of the movement, such as coaches and volunteers. By knowing who our athletes are, and what their needs are, Special Olympics and its supporters can advocate more effectively on behalf of athletes and all people with ID.

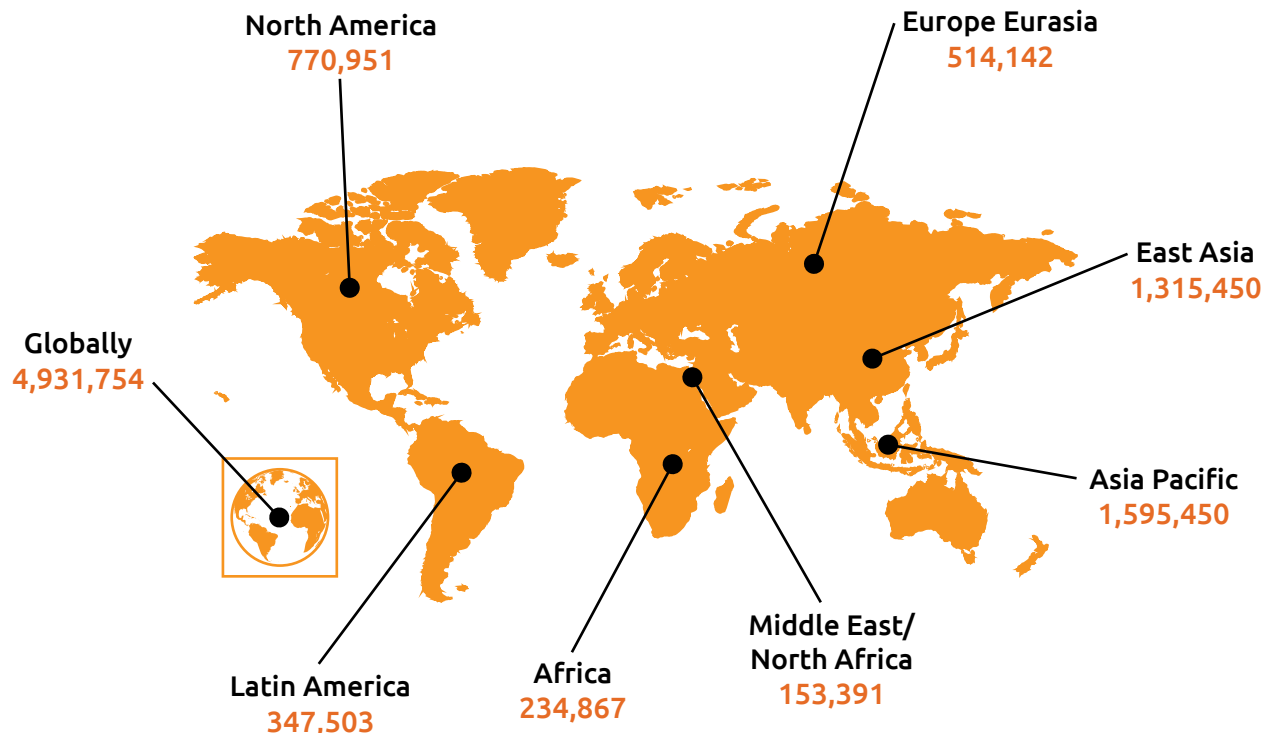
WHO ARE OUR ATHLETES?

Special Olympics continues to grow the number of athletes served. **In 2011, Special Olympics served close to 4 million athletes; five years later in 2016, that number rose to close to 4.9 million athletes. This constitutes 23% growth in six years.** For more historical figures reference our [number of Special Olympics athletes from 2000-2013](#). Special Olympics has athletes of all ages, with a fairly even split (except a small representation for ages 2-7) among the age groups collected in the census: 2-7, 8-15, 16-21, and 22+. Females represent a minority of athletes and comprised 39.4% of all athletes in 2016. See the [2016 Reach Report](#) for more detailed information.

¹ Maulik, P. K., Mascarenhas, M. N., Mathers, C. D., Dua, T., & Saxena, S. (2011). Prevalence of intellectual disability: a meta-analysis of population-based studies. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 32(2), 419-436.

² Fujiura, G. T., Rutkowski-Kmitta, V., & Owen, R. (2010). Make measurable what is not so: National monitoring of the status of persons with intellectual disability*. *Journal Of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 35(4), 244-258.

NUMBER OF ATHLETES BY REGION (2016)



Evaluations in China, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and the United States have found that there is no “typical” Special Olympics athlete^{3,4,5}:

- In some countries, such as China, Peru, and the United States, the majority of athletes participate through their schools, yet in other countries this is not the case. For example, in Argentina only 19% of athletes participated in Special Olympics through their school.
- The length of participation in Special Olympics varies, although in most countries participants remain involved for many years. Athletes participated for an average of 9 years in Argentina, 8 years in Peru, and 11 years in the United States.
- While the profiles of athletes varied, **a clear majority of athletes in all countries had never participated in organized sports before Special Olympics**, demonstrating that Special Olympics is meeting a need.

3 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

4 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report.* Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

5 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics Inc.

Some research has delved deeper into understanding the characteristics of Special Olympics athletes. Recent research conducted in the United States surveyed over 1,000 people with ID and found that **38% of people with ID currently participate in Special Olympics or had participated in Special Olympics at some point in their lives.**

Additional results found that in the United States⁶:



The majority of Special Olympics athletes in the United States were male.



The majority of athletes in the United States were white (86.3%), followed by two or more races (6.1%), followed by African-American (5.5%).



74.7% of athletes in the United States completed high school, compared to 62.7% of adults with ID who had not participated in Special Olympics.



The majority of athletes in the United States reside with their family (58.9%) and large numbers also live in group homes (25.8%).



70% of athletes in the United States were rated to be in good or excellent health, compared to 55% of adults with ID who had not participated in Special Olympics.

For complete comparison tables, see the [Demographic Tables for U.S. Athletes and Non-Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities](#).

⁶ Siperstein, G. (2012). [Special Olympics Household Study]. Unpublished raw data.

WHO ARE OUR VOLUNTEERS?

Volunteers offer crucial support to help Special Olympics provide year-round quality practices and competitions. **In 2016, 1,156,397 volunteers worked with Special Olympics, including 339,394 youth volunteers, 74,376 law enforcement volunteers, and 25,820 health volunteers.** One important group of volunteers is Special Olympics' coaches. Coaches play an important role in Special Olympics and in the lives of athletes. **In total, over 430,000 coaches supported Special Olympics in 2016.**⁷ Similar to athletes, the background of coaches varies considerably from country to country.

- Evaluations from 2005 and 2008 found that while most coaches in the United States (71%) and China (81%) reported playing sports competitively themselves, nearly one quarter of coaches in China (24%) had played professionally or on a national team compared to 2% in the United States and 4% in Europe.
- While nearly half (44%) of U.S. coaches reported having a family member with ID, that number fell to only 2% of coaches in China.^{3,4}

Regardless of their background or location, Special Olympics coaches strive to create a quality sports experience for all athletes.

KEY FINDINGS:

SPECIAL OLYMPICS DEMOGRAPHICS RESEARCH



People with intellectual disabilities comprise approximately **1% of the global population.**¹



38% of people with intellectual disabilities in the United States currently participate in Special Olympics or have participated in Special Olympics at some point in their lives.⁶



Studies have found that a majority of athletes in China, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, and the United States had never participated in organized sports before joining Special Olympics, demonstrating that **Special Olympics is meeting a need.**^{3,4,5}



In total, over **430,000 coaches** supported Special Olympics in 2016.⁷



In 2016, Special Olympics served more than **4.9 million athletes.**⁷

⁷ 2016 Reach Report (2016). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.