

# Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

## DEFINITION

*Children witnessing domestic violence* is the percentage of reported domestic violence incidents resulting in an arrest in which children under age 18 were present in the home. The data are based on police reports of domestic violence. Domestic violence is the use of physical force, or threat of force, against a current or former partner in an intimate relationship, resulting in fear and emotional and/or physical suffering.

## SIGNIFICANCE

An estimated 10 million U.S. children are exposed to domestic violence each year. Rates of partner violence are higher among couples with children than those without children.<sup>12</sup> In Rhode Island in 2014 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 35% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.<sup>3</sup>

Children can be exposed to domestic violence in a number of ways. They may witness it directly (by seeing and/or hearing violent incidents), have their lives disrupted by moving or being separated from a parent, and/or may be used by the abusive parent to manipulate or gain control over the victim. Children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect than those who are not.<sup>4,5</sup> Children may also

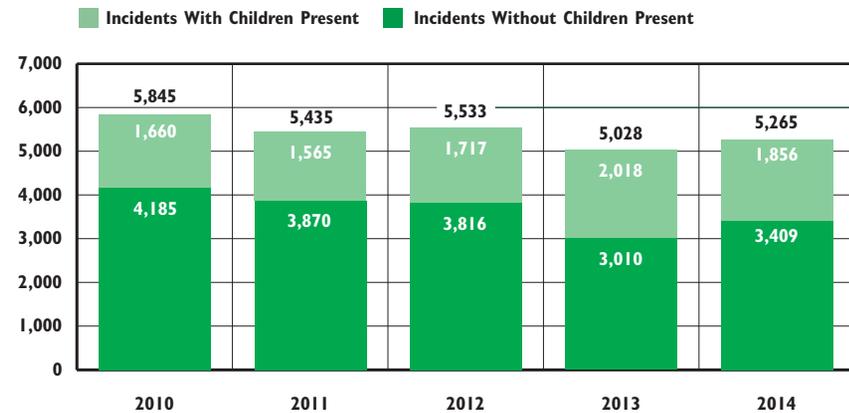
lose a parent to domestic homicide.<sup>6,7</sup>

Exposure to domestic violence is distressing to children and can lead to mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, in childhood and later in life. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience physical, emotional, health, and learning challenges throughout their childhood and adulthood. They are more likely to have concentration and memory problems, and to have difficulty with school performance than children who do not witness domestic violence.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

While many children who have witnessed domestic violence show resilience, exposure to violence may impair a child's capacity for partnering and parenting later in life. There is a strong association between witnessing domestic violence as a child and becoming a perpetrator of domestic violence as an adult.<sup>11,12</sup>

Incidents of domestic violence are historically under-reported. Nationally, it is estimated that 41% of family violence incidents are not reported to police.<sup>13</sup> Rhode Island data may similarly under-represent the number of domestic violence incidents witnessed by children because not all incidents are reported to police and children may be unwilling to admit that they witnessed the incident.<sup>14</sup>

## Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrest, Rhode Island, 2010-2014\*



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2010-2014. Includes domestic violence reports resulting from an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police. \*2015 data are not yet complete and will be updated in next year's Factbook.

- ◆ In Rhode Island in 2014 (the most recent year for which full data are available), there were 5,265 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, up 5% from 5,028 incidents in 2013. Children were reported present in 35% (1,856) of incidents in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Rhode Island police officers document children's exposure to violence on reporting forms by noting the number and ages of minor children living in the home, how many were present during the incident, how many saw the incident and how many heard it.<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ Rhode Island police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,165 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,283 arrests during 2014. These incidents were not mutually exclusive and more than one child may have witnessed the incident.<sup>17</sup>
- ◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of six domestic violence shelters and advocacy programs provides services to victims, including shelter, transitional housing, advocacy, individual and group counseling, and education.<sup>18</sup> During 2016, the network provided services to 8,710 individuals, including 447 children (compared to 8,934 and 587, respectively, in 2015). In 2016, 237 children and 241 adults spent a total of 21,476 nights in domestic violence shelters. Eighty-one children and 51 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) during 2016.<sup>19</sup>

# Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

Table 30. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2014\*

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF REPORTS	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	40	9	23%
Bristol	79	21	27%
Burrillville	53	18	34%
Central Falls	171	72	42%
Charlestown	32	11	34%
Coventry	133	50	38%
Cranston	318	136	43%
Cumberland	110	41	37%
East Greenwich	36	8	22%
East Providence	228	97	43%
Exeter***	NA	NA	NA
Foster	28	11	39%
Glocester	24	5	21%
Hopkinton	31	11	35%
Jamestown	5	2	40%
Johnston	161	53	33%
Lincoln	50	25	50%
Little Compton	9	0	0%
Middletown	100	35	35%
Narragansett	69	29	42%
New Shoreham	3	1	33%
Newport	230	67	29%
North Kingstown	88	35	40%
North Providence	227	60	26%
North Smithfield	50	24	48%
Pawtucket	678	242	36%
Portsmouth	75	19	25%
Providence	794	302	38%
Richmond	23	9	39%
Scituate	25	8	32%
Smithfield	57	16	28%
South Kingstown	88	38	43%
Tiverton	83	32	39%
Warren	74	35	47%
Warwick	284	93	33%
West Greenwich	21	5	24%
West Warwick	285	81	28%
Westerly	135	59	44%
Woonsocket**	295*	72*	24%*
Rhode Island State Police	73	24	33%
Four Core Cities	1,938	688	36%
Remainder of State	3,254	1,144	35%
Rhode Island	5,265	1,856	35%

## Support for Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

◆ With the help of caring adults, children who have witnessed domestic violence can develop resilience and thrive. Effective therapeutic interventions often focus on supporting parents, and can include increasing parenting skills, assisting parents in addressing mental health issues, and supporting parents' efforts to live in safe environments. Other strategies include connecting children to adult mentors, identifying and nurturing areas of strength, and encouraging children to contribute to their families or communities in a positive way.<sup>20</sup>

### Source of Data for Table/Methodology

\*Data for 2015 were incomplete at the time of publication and will be published in next year's Factbook. 2014 data are repeated here.

The number of domestic violence incident reports in which an arrest was made and the number of incidents in which children were present are based on the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms sent by Rhode Island law enforcement to the Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit between January 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014.

The data are only the incidents during which an arrest was made in which children were present, and do not represent the total number of children who experienced domestic violence in their homes. More than one child may have been present at an incident.

\*\*Data for Woonsocket are provisional.

\*\*\*Reports of domestic violence in Exeter are included in the Rhode Island State Police numbers. Rhode Island State Police numbers are included in the Rhode Island state totals.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

### References

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- Stop Violence Against Women. (2010). *Effects of domestic violence on children*. Retrieved March 14, 2017, from www.stopvaw.org
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