

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 15.5 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.^{1,2} In Rhode Island in 2017 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 27% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.³

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 exposed to domestic violence may also lose a parent to domestic homicide.^{4,5,6} Children exposed to domestic violence are often victims of physical abuse, and

they are at an increased risk of entering into abusive relationships or becoming an abuser themselves.^{7,8}

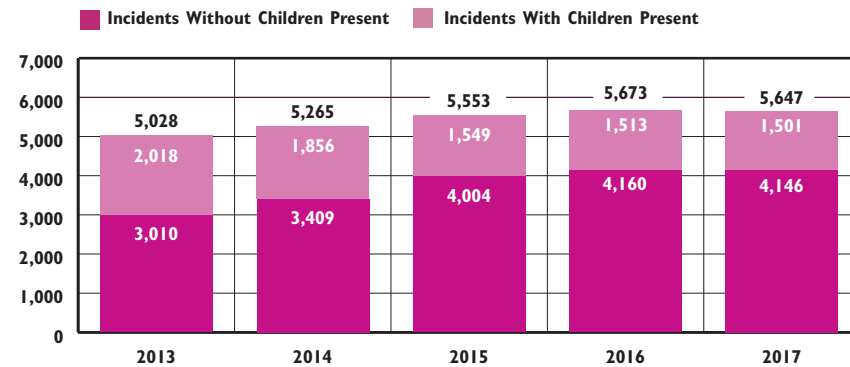
Exposure to domestic violence is distressing to children and can lead to mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, in childhood and later in life. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience physical, emotional, health, and learning challenges 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 have not witnessed domestic violence.^{9,10,11}

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.^{12,13}

Children can be injured or killed in domestic violence especially when their parent is planning to leave an abusive relationship. This includes biological children as well as step- and adopted children who live in the household and are children of the victimized partner.¹⁴ It is, therefore, important to put supports in place to ensure the safety of all children living in households experiencing domestic violence.



Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrest, Rhode Island, 2013-2017



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2013-2017. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

◆ In Rhode Island in 2017, there were 5,647 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, down less than 1% from 5,673 incidents in 2016. Children were reported present in 27% (1,501) of incidents in 2017.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

◆ In Rhode Island in 2017, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,123 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,256 arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive, and more than one child may have witnessed each incident.¹⁷

◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of six domestic violence shelters and advocacy programs provides emergency and support services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking.¹⁸ During 2019, the network provided services to 10,134 individuals, including 601 children (up from 8,514 and 556, respectively, in 2018). In 2019, 191 children and 214 adults spent a total of 23,965 nights in domestic violence shelters. During 2019, 77 children and 63 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) for a total of 33,063 nights.¹⁹

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Table 31. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2017

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF REPORTS	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	34	9	26%
Bristol	79	10	13%
Burrillville	69	20	29%
Central Falls	182	66	36%
Charlestown	26	9	35%
Coventry	157	39	25%
Cranston	358	92	26%
Cumberland	128	45	35%
East Greenwich	30	3	10%
East Providence	303	78	26%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	27	13	48%
Glocester	22	7	32%
Hopkinton	40	16	40%
Jamestown	12	3	25%
Johnston	130	29	22%
Lincoln	60	15	25%
Little Compton	2	1	50%
Middletown	104	21	20%
Narragansett	62	10	16%
New Shoreham	4	1	25%
Newport	178	44	25%
North Kingstown	78	30	38%
North Providence	166	39	23%
North Smithfield	72	17	24%
Pawtucket	862	229	27%
Portsmouth	82	17	21%
Providence	893	260	29%
Richmond	20	2	10%
Scituate	14	4	29%
Smithfield	59	13	22%
South Kingstown	100	28	28%
Tiverton	56	13	23%
Warren	54	14	26%
Warwick	263	84	32%
West Greenwich	8	5	63%
West Warwick	250	66	26%
Westerly	124	17	14%
Woonsocket	448	117	26%
Rhode Island State Police	91	15	16%
Four Core Cities	2,385	672	28%
Remainder of State	3,171	814	26%
Rhode Island	5,647	1,501	27%



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.²⁰



Domestic Homicide and Guns

◆ When firearms are present in domestic violence situations, victims are six times more likely to die.²¹ Between 2006 and 2015, 42% percent of Rhode Island women killed by intimate partners were shot to death.²²

◆ In 2018, "red flag" legislation passed that authorizes the Rhode Island Supreme Court to issue "extreme risk protection orders" requiring the surrender of all firearms from persons determined to be capable of causing personal injury.²³

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

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, 2017 and December 31, 2017.

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.

*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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(continued on page 184)