

# 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

Millions of children are exposed to domestic violence each year.<sup>1</sup> National studies indicate that rates of partner violence are higher among couples with children than those without children.<sup>2</sup> In Rhode Island in 2008, police reports indicate that children were present at 31% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.<sup>3</sup>

Children are exposed to domestic violence in several ways. They may witness or hear violent events, become directly involved by trying to intervene, or experience the aftermath of violence by seeing their parent's emotional and physical injuries or damage done to their homes.<sup>4</sup> Children who are exposed to domestic violence are much more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect than those who are not. Nationally, between 45% and 70% of

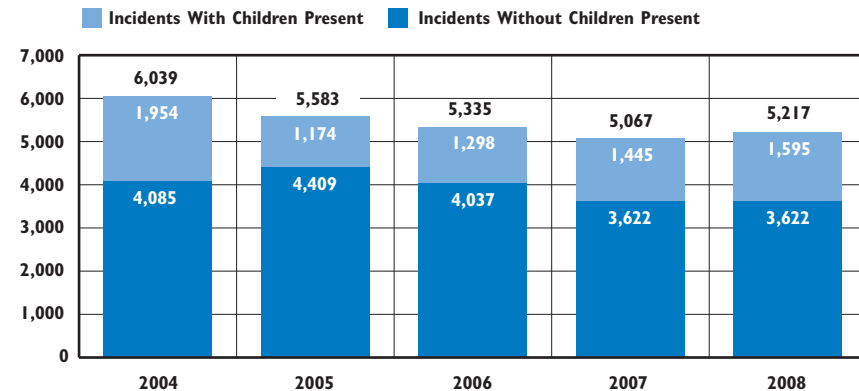
children exposed to domestic violence are also victims of physical abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Exposure to violence in the home can affect brain development and impair cognitive, academic and social functioning. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to have social, emotional, health, and learning problems. They are more prone to depression, anxiety, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder, concentration and memory problems, and difficulty with school performance than children who do not witness domestic violence.<sup>6,7</sup>

Research suggests that exposure to inter-parental violence increases the likelihood that individuals will perpetrate (particularly men) or be the victims of violence during dating and marriage.<sup>8</sup> Exposure to violence may impair a child's capacity for partnering and parenting later in life.<sup>9</sup>

Effective interventions for children who have witnessed domestic violence depend on coordination among schools, early education programs, pediatric health care, mental health programs, child welfare, courts and law enforcement. These service systems can identify and address emergent problems related to healthy child development that can result from exposure to family violence.<sup>10</sup>

## Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrest, Rhode Island, 2004-2008



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training Unit, 2004-2008. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest from local police and Rhode Island State Police. Data for 2008 are provisional.

◆ In 2008, there were 5,217 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests. Children were present in 31% (1,595) of these incidents. Police officers reported that children saw their parent being abused in 1,259 incidents, and children heard their parent being abused in 1,382 incidents resulting in arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive.<sup>11</sup>

## Under-reporting of Domestic Violence

◆ Many domestic violence incidents are never reported to police. In the U.S. between 1998 and 2002, it is estimated that somewhat more than one-half (59%) of family violence incidents were reported to police.<sup>12</sup>

◆ Police reports are not always fully completed, so even when arrests were made, the data likely under-represent the number of domestic violence incidents in which children were present.<sup>13</sup>

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Table 29. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2008

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF REPORTS	TOTAL # WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	37	8	22%
Bristol	65	22	34%
Burrillville	66	25	38%
Central Falls	179	78	44%
Charlestown	21	3	14%
Coventry	164	52	32%
Cranston	346	96	28%
Cumberland	105	29	28%
East Greenwich	42	10	24%
East Providence	171	57	33%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	26	6	23%
Glocester	28	7	25%
Hopkinton	29	14	48%
Jamestown	6	1	17%
Johnston	113	41	36%
Lincoln	46	13	28%
Little Compton	10	4	40%
Middletown	85	25	29%
Narragansett	83	18	22%
New Shoreham	10	4	40%
Newport	166	52	31%
North Kingstown	114	35	31%
North Providence	188	52	28%
North Smithfield	46	12	26%
Pawtucket	530	138	26%
Portsmouth	86	19	22%
Providence	825	267	32%
Richmond	31	12	39%
Scituate	22	5	23%
Smithfield	84	19	23%
South Kingstown	85	23	27%
Tiverton	96	22	23%
Warren	69	12	17%
Warwick	327	103	31%
West Greenwich	16	5	31%
West Warwick	328	88	27%
Westerly	116	40	34%
Woonsocket	385	148	38%
Rhode Island State Police	71	30	42%
Core Cities	2,413	771	32%
Remainder of State	2,733	794	29%
Rhode Island	5,217	1,595	31%

## Children and Domestic Violence in Rhode Island

◆ Between 2004 and 2008 the total number of domestic violence incidents resulting in an arrest decreased from 6,039 to 5,217. The percentage of such incidents with children present remained fairly stable, 32% in 2004 compared to 31% in 2008.<sup>14</sup>

◆ Rhode Island police officers use special reporting forms to document children's exposure to violence. The attending officer may check any combination of three boxes: "Were children present during the incident?", "Did children witness the incident?", and "Did children hear the incident?"<sup>15</sup>

◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of six shelters and advocacy programs provides services to victims of domestic violence, including shelter, advocacy, counseling and education. During 2009, 313 women and 312 children spent a total of 18,536 bed nights in a domestic violence shelter. Rhode Island's domestic violence agencies provided services including therapy, individual counseling, expressive arts therapy and child care to 540 children. The shelters also conduct school-based domestic violence prevention programs.<sup>16</sup>

### 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, 2008 and December 31, 2008. Data for 2008 are provisional.

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.

Core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket.

### References

- <sup>12</sup> McDonald, R., Jouriles, E., Ramisetty-Mikler, S., Caetano, R., & Green, C. (2006). Estimating the number of American children living in partner-violent families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 20*, (1), 137-142.
- <sup>3,11,13,16</sup> Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit. Based on data from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms, 2004-2008.
- <sup>4</sup> Edleson, J., Ellerton, A., Seagren, E., Kirchberg, S., Schmidt, S., & Ambrose, A. (2007). Assessing child exposure to adult domestic violence. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*, (7), 961-971.
- <sup>5</sup> Summers, A. (2006). *Children's exposure to domestic violence: A guide to research and resources*. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.
- <sup>6,10</sup> Cohen, E., McAlister Groves, B., & Kracke, K. (2009). *Understanding children's exposure to violence. Moving from Evidence to Action: The Safe Start series on children exposed to violence: Issue Brief #1*. North Bethesda, MD: Safe Start Center, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Program, U.S. Department of Justice.

(continued on page 169)