

Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

DEFINITION

Children witnessing domestic violence is the percentage of reported domestic violence incidents in which children under age 18 were present in the home. The data are based on police reports of domestic violence in 2003. 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

National research indicates that millions of children are exposed to domestic violence each year.¹ In Rhode Island in 2003, police reports indicate that children were present in 32% of domestic violence incidents reported.² National surveys of mothers indicate that 80% to 90% of children in homes where there is domestic violence are aware of the abuse.³

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.⁴ Children who are exposed to domestic violence are much more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect. Both child maltreatment and

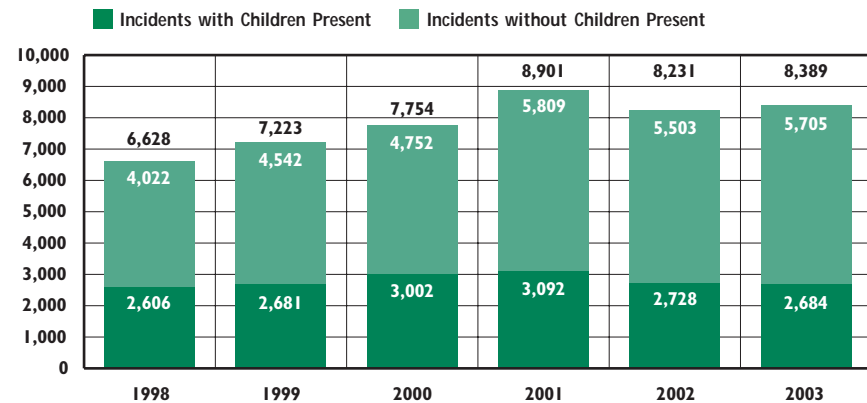
domestic violence occur in an estimated 30% to 60% of families where there is some form of family violence.⁵ The greater the intensity of the violence against an adult partner, the more likely it is that children are abused as well.⁶

Exposure to violence in the home impairs cognitive, academic and social functioning. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be aggressive and to have behavior problems. They are more prone to depression, anxiety, fear, phobias, sleep disruption and low self-esteem.⁷

Although many children experience these negative effects as a result of exposure to domestic violence, some children emerge from the experience relatively unscathed. A child's age and temperament, the severity and frequency of the violence and the availability of adults who can emotionally protect or sustain the child greatly affect the child's response.⁸

The effects of exposure to domestic violence can last into adulthood. For males, growing up in a violent home is the strongest predictor of becoming a batterer in the teen and adult years. Both men and women who grow up in violent homes are at increased risk for depression and other trauma-related symptoms.⁹

Domestic Violence Incidents, Rhode Island 1998-2003



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training Unit, 1998-2003. Includes domestic violence reports from local police and Rhode Island State Police.

◆ The number of domestic violence incidents reported to Rhode Island police increased from 6,628 in 1998 to 8,901 in 2001 and then declined to 8,389 in 2003. The number of reported incidents with children present increased from 2,606 in 1998 to 3,092 in 2001 and then declined to 2,684 in 2003.

◆ 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 2004, 264 women and 315 children spent time in a domestic violence shelter. Rhode Island's domestic violence agencies provided services to 755 children including therapy, individual counseling, expressive arts therapy and child care. The shelters also provide school-based domestic violence prevention programs.¹⁰

◆ Early childhood programs such as child care, Head Start, educational home visiting, early intervention, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs can be an important avenue for intervention with children who have witnessed domestic violence.¹¹

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Table 23.

Domestic Violence Incidents with Children Present, Rhode Island, 2003

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL NUMBER OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENT REPORTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF INCIDENTS IN WHICH A CHILD WAS PRESENT	% OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	48	12	25%
Bristol	173	47	27%
Burrillville	115	49	43%
Central Falls	211	64	30%
Charlestown	39	13	33%
Coventry	202	75	37%
Cranston	454	130	29%
Cumberland	137	41	30%
East Greenwich	32	8	25%
East Providence	269	97	36%
Exeter	NA	NA	NA
Foster	8	0	0%
Glocester	76	23	30%
Hopkinton	43	16	37%
Jamestown	15	4	27%
Johnston	384	128	33%
Lincoln	139	48	35%
Little Compton	17	1	6%
Middletown	141	42	30%
Narragansett	127	26	20%
New Shoreham	4	0	0%
Newport	452	116	26%
North Kingstown	240	81	34%
North Providence	284	78	27%
North Smithfield	75	26	35%
Pawtucket	792	270	34%
Portsmouth	123	32	26%
Providence	1,697	586	35%
Richmond	25	11	44%
Scituate	29	11	38%
Smithfield	152	38	25%
South Kingstown	146	48	33%
Tiverton	152	45	30%
Warren	125	27	22%
Warwick	435	152	35%
West Greenwich	23	6	26%
West Warwick	234	85	36%
Westerly	157	56	36%
Woonsocket	498	155	31%
<i>Rhode Island State Police</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>32%</i>
<i>Core Cities</i>	<i>3,884</i>	<i>1,276</i>	<i>33%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>4,389</i>	<i>1,371</i>	<i>31%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>8,389</i>	<i>2,684</i>	<i>32%</i>

Children and Domestic Violence in Rhode Island

◆ 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? Did children hear the incident?¹²

◆ In 2003, police officers reported that in 1,997 incidents the children saw their parent being abused and in 2,203 incidents the children heard (but did not see) their parent being abused.¹³

◆ Table 23 under-represents the number of incidents of domestic violence in which a child was present because police reports are not fully completed in all cases. Additionally, many cases of domestic violence are never reported to police.

◆ Table 23 underestimates the total number of children who experienced domestic violence in their homes, because more than one child may be present at an incident.

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

The number of domestic violence incident reports and the number of incidents in which children were present are based on the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms received by the Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit between January 1, 2003 and December 31, 2003.

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 for Indicator

^{1,3,5,6,9} Children's Defense Fund. (2002). *Domestic violence and its impact on children* (Fact Sheet). Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

^{2,13} Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit. Based on data from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms received from police departments between January 1, 2003 and December 31, 2003.

^{4,7,8} Edleson, J. Mbilinyi, L. & Shetty, S. (2003). *Parenting in the context of domestic violence*. San Francisco, CA: Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts.

¹⁰ The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Data for period from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004.

¹¹ Cohen, E. & Knitzer, J. (January 2004). *Young children living with domestic violence: The role of early childhood programs*. Iowa City, IA: School of Social Work, The University of Iowa.

¹² Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Reporting Form.