

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 2002. 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 2002, police reports indicate that children were present in 33% 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

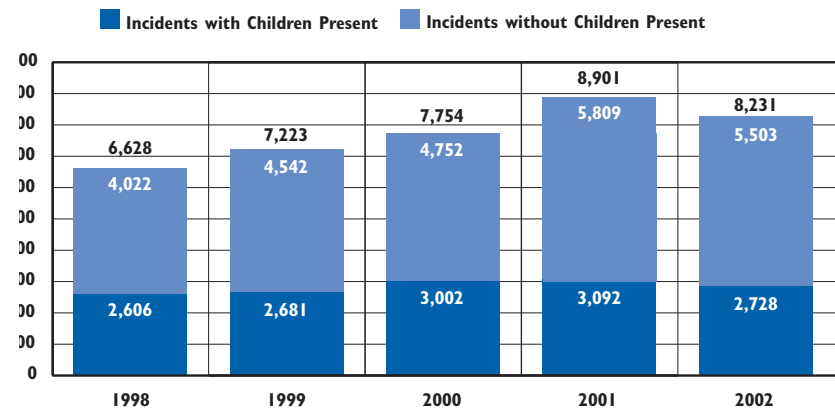
Children are exposed to domestic violence in several ways. They may witness or hear violent events, become directly involved by trying to intervene, or experience the aftermath of violence by seeing their mother's emotional and physical injuries or damage done to their homes.⁴ Children who are exposed 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 1998-2002



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training Unit, 1998-2002. 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 8,231 in 2002. The number of reported incidents with children present increased from 2,606 in 1998 to 3,092 in 2001 and then declined to 2,728 in 2002.
- ◆ 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 2003, 314 women and 377 children spent time in a domestic violence shelter. Rhode Island's domestic violence agencies provided services to 873 children including therapy, individual counseling, expressive arts therapy, and child care. The shelters also provide school-based domestic violence prevention programs.¹⁰
- ◆ A recent study indicates that Black and Hispanic women in Rhode Island are overrepresented in police reports of domestic violence, and that Black women in more affluent neighborhoods report incidents of domestic violence to police at higher rates than other women. The reasons for these differences are unclear but may be linked to variation in the availability of alternative avenues of assistance, including access to social supports, private counseling and other resources.¹¹

Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

Table 22.

Domestic Violence Incidents with Children Present, Rhode Island, 2002

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	56	16	29%
Bristol	167	56	34%
Burrillville	120	44	37%
Central Falls	165	65	39%
Charlestown	40	15	38%
Coventry	214	73	34%
Cranston	460	186	40%
Cumberland	84	33	39%
East Greenwich	42	13	31%
East Providence	267	98	37%
Exeter	NA	NA	NA
Foster	10	3	30%
Glocester	80	31	39%
Hopkinton	60	27	45%
Jamestown	22	11	50%
Johnston	397	124	31%
Lincoln	97	30	31%
Little Compton	20	6	30%
Middletown	140	38	27%
Narragansett	107	26	24%
New Shoreham	5	0	0%
Newport	392	99	25%
North Kingstown	293	100	34%
North Providence	296	88	30%
North Smithfield	69	18	26%
Pawtucket	915	292	32%
Portsmouth	139	34	24%
Providence	1,359	445	33%
Richmond	19	6	32%
Scituate	34	14	41%
Smithfield	152	35	23%
South Kingstown	144	56	39%
Tiverton	218	77	35%
Warren	208	45	22%
Warwick	449	161	36%
Westerly	157	57	36%
West Greenwich	19	6	32%
West Warwick	171	55	32%
Woonsocket	533	203	38%
Rhode Island State Police	111	42	38%
Core Cities	3,535	1,159	33%
Remainder of State	4,585	1,527	33%
Rhode Island	8,231	2,728	33%



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 2002, police officers reported that in 2,014 incidents the children saw their parent being abused and in 2,241 incidents the children heard (but did not see) their parent being abused.¹³

◆ Table 22 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 22 underestimates the total number of children who experienced domestic violence in their homes, since 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, 2002 and December 31, 2002.

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} *Domestic Violence and Its Impact on Children.* (Fall 2002). 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, 2002 and December 31, 2002.

^{4,7,8} Edleson, J. et al. (March 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, 2003 to December 31, 2003.

¹¹ Pearlman, D. et al. (January-February 2003). Neighborhood Environment, Racial Position, and Risk of Police-Reported Domestic Violence: A Contextual Analysis. *Public Health Reports*, Vol. 118.

¹² Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Reporting Form.