

# 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.<sup>1,2</sup> In Rhode Island in 2021 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 24% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.<sup>3</sup>

Children can be exposed to domestic violence in several ways. They may witness it directly (by seeing and/or hearing violent incidents), have their lives disrupted by the chaos of an unsteady and hostile environment, 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.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Children who are 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.<sup>7,8</sup>

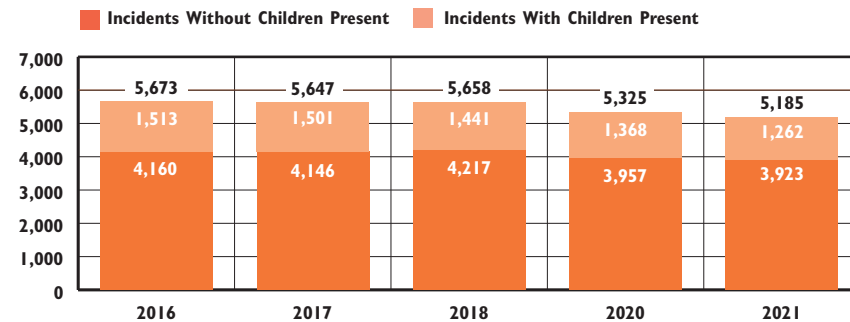
Exposure to domestic violence is distressing to children and can lead to mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, in childhood and later in life. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience physical, emotional, health, and learning challenges 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 have not witnessed domestic violence.<sup>9,10,11</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. This cycle can be broken through honest conversations with — and positive coping strategies taught by — supportive adults.<sup>12,13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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, 2016-2018, 2020, 2021



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2016-2018, 2020, 2021. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

- ◆ In Rhode Island in 2021, there were 5,185 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, down 3% from 5,325 incidents in 2020. Children were reported present in 24% (1,262) of incidents in 2021.<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>
- ◆ In Rhode Island in 2021, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 945 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,050 arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive, and more than one child may have witnessed each incident.<sup>17</sup>
- ◆ Rhode Island's domestic violence shelters and advocacy programs provide emergency and support services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking.<sup>18</sup> During 2022, Rhode Island's domestic violence shelters provided services to 10,181 individuals, including 451 children. In 2022, 165 children and 178 adults spent a total of 27,694 nights in domestic violence shelters, 79 children and 57 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence). Ninety-one children and adults moved into permanent supportive housing, and 225 accessed Rapid Re-housing.<sup>19,20</sup>

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Table 30. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2021

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	26	12	46%
Bristol	51	15	29%
Burrillville	67	19	28%
Central Falls	111	38	34%
Charlestown	25	5	20%
Coventry	121	34	28%
Cranston	272	57	21%
Cumberland	117	24	21%
East Greenwich	18	3	17%
East Providence	165	34	21%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	5	2	40%
Glocester	13	4	31%
Hopkinton	20	5	25%
Jamestown	5	1	20%
Johnston	139	25	18%
Lincoln	52	9	17%
Little Compton	4	1	25%
Middletown	72	13	18%
Narragansett	37	8	22%
New Shoreham	5	0	0%
Newport	150	27	18%
North Kingstown	73	15	21%
North Providence	124	37	30%
North Smithfield	77	20	26%
Pawtucket	744	178	24%
Portsmouth	106	31	29%
Providence	1,039	287	28%
Richmond	15	5	33%
Scituate	11	5	45%
Smithfield	56	12	21%
South Kingstown	73	24	33%
Tiverton	52	12	23%
Warren	51	10	20%
Warwick	363	87	24%
West Greenwich	10	2	20%
West Warwick	286	67	23%
Westerly	146	32	22%
Woonsocket	424	95	22%
Rhode Island State Police	60	7	12%
Four Core Cities	2,318	598	26%
Remainder of State	2,807	657	23%
Rhode Island	5,185	1,262	24%



## 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 and assisting parents in addressing mental health issues. Other strategies include connecting children to adult mentors, nurturing areas of strength, and encouraging children to contribute to their families or communities in a positive way.<sup>21</sup>



## Domestic Homicide and Guns

◆ When firearms are present in domestic violence situations, women are five times more likely to die. Nationally, nearly half of all women murdered are killed as a result of domestic violence.<sup>22</sup>

◆ 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 and prevents them from purchasing, receiving or attempting to purchase or receive firearms.<sup>23</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, 2021 and December 31, 2021.

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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- Berger, A., Wildsmith, E., Manlove, J., & Steward-Streng, N. (2012). *Relationship violence among young adult couples*. Retrieved from childtrends.org
- <sup>3,15,17</sup> Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit. Based on data from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms, 2016-2018, 2020, 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> National Domestic Violence Hotline. (n.d.). *Children as an abusive mechanism*. Retrieved from thehotline.org
- <sup>5,9</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2023). *Domestic violence and children*. Retrieved from ncadv.org
- <sup>6,14</sup> Zeoli, A. (2018). *Children, domestic violence, and guns*. Minneapolis, MN: The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and Firearms.

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