

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 2018 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 25% 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 who are exposed to domestic violence are often victims of physical

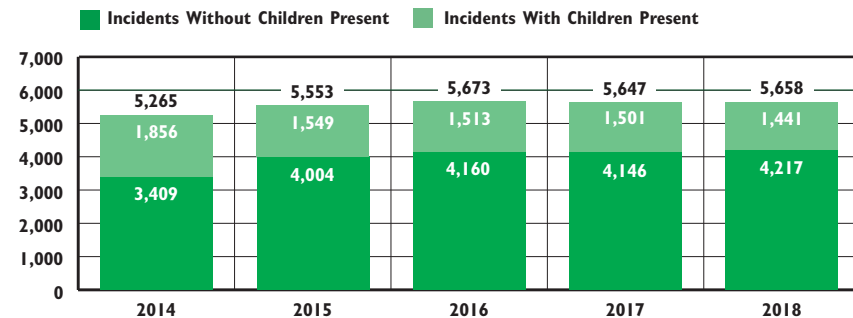
abuse, and they are at an increased risk of entering into abusive relationships or becoming an abuser themselves.^{7,8}

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, 2014-2018



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2014-2018. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

- ◆ In Rhode Island in 2018, there were 5,658 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, up less than 1% from 5,647 incidents in 2017. Children were reported present in 25% (1,441) of incidents in 2018.¹⁵ 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 2018, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,082 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,223 arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive, and more than one child may have witnessed each incident.¹⁷
- ◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of domestic violence shelters and advocacy programs provides emergency and support services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking.¹⁸ During 2020, the network provided services to 9,259 individuals, including 486 children. In 2020, 147 children and 186 adults spent a total of 20,649 nights in domestic violence shelters, 73 children and 54 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) for a total of 26,616 nights, 10 families moved into permanent supportive housing, and 42 families accessed Rapid Re-housing.^{19,20} Due to the COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home orders, an increase in domestic violence was expected. However, nationally, there was a significant decrease in hotline calls, as victims trapped at home were unable to safely access resources.²¹

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Table 31. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2018

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF REPORTS	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	24	8	33%
Bristol	69	15	22%
Burrillville	60	17	28%
Central Falls	174	46	26%
Charlestown	28	11	39%
Coventry	157	37	24%
Cranston	329	87	26%
Cumberland	102	27	26%
East Greenwich	16	3	19%
East Providence	257	67	26%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	25	10	40%
Glocester	21	3	14%
Hopkinton	29	11	38%
Jamestown	8	1	13%
Johnston	117	18	15%
Lincoln	73	22	30%
Little Compton	8	3	38%
Middletown	86	27	31%
Narragansett	65	14	22%
New Shoreham	3	0	0%
Newport	159	30	19%
North Kingstown	127	26	20%
North Providence	177	46	26%
North Smithfield	93	19	20%
Pawtucket	875	221	25%
Portsmouth	67	19	28%
Providence	1,031	297	29%
Richmond	25	11	44%
Scituate	12	6	50%
Smithfield	43	13	30%
South Kingstown	87	18	21%
Tiverton	36	8	22%
Warren	56	14	25%
Warwick	308	80	26%
West Greenwich	12	2	17%
West Warwick	267	69	26%
Westerly	155	37	24%
Woonsocket	403	87	22%
Rhode Island State Police	74	11	15%
Four Core Cities	2,483	651	26%
Remainder of State	3,175	790	25%
Rhode Island	5,658	1,441	25%



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.²²



Domestic Homicide and Guns

◆ When firearms are present in domestic violence situations, victims are six times more likely to die.²³

◆ 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.²⁴

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, 2018 and December 31, 2018.

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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