

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 2020 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 26% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.³

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 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

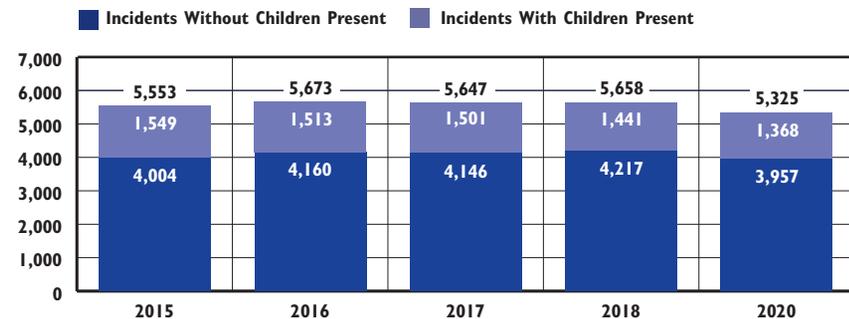
abuse, and they are at an increased risk of entering into abusive relationships or becoming an abuser themselves.^{7,8}

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, 2015-2018, 2020



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2015-2018, 2020. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

◆ In Rhode Island in 2020, there were 5,325 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, down 6% from 5,658 incidents in 2018. Children were reported present in 26% (1,368) of incidents in 2020.¹⁵ 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 2020, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,036 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,160 arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive, and more than one child may have witnessed each incident.¹⁷

◆ 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.¹⁸ During 2021, Rhode Island's domestic violence shelters provided services to 10,311 individuals, including 504 children. In 2021, 149 children and 146 adults spent a total of 31,319 nights in domestic violence shelters, 81 children and 58 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) for a total of 12,826 nights. Seven families, 11 adults, and nine children moved into permanent supportive housing, and 45 families accessed Rapid Re-housing.^{19,20}

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Table 31. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2020

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	34	4	12%
Bristol	59	12	20%
Burrillville	74	18	24%
Central Falls	100	40	40%
Charlestown	28	5	18%
Coventry	144	44	31%
Cranston	317	87	27%
Cumberland	108	31	29%
East Greenwich	28	5	18%
East Providence	188	54	29%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	16	6	38%
Glocester	22	3	14%
Hopkinton	26	10	38%
Jamestown	2	1	50%
Johnston	121	28	23%
Lincoln	51	9	18%
Little Compton	6	0	0%
Middletown	67	17	25%
Narragansett	41	7	17%
New Shoreham	0	0	0%
Newport	140	30	21%
North Kingstown	86	25	29%
North Providence	206	51	25%
North Smithfield	72	13	18%
Pawtucket	711	146	21%
Portsmouth	75	13	17%
Providence	1039	283	27%
Richmond	24	8	33%
Scituate	22	7	32%
Smithfield	52	15	29%
South Kingstown	84	22	26%
Tiverton	51	13	25%
Warren	39	9	23%
Warwick	323	91	28%
West Greenwich	4	1	25%
West Warwick	364	111	30%
Westerly	148	44	30%
Woonsocket	409	100	24%
Rhode Island State Police	44	5	11%
Four Core Cities	2,259	569	25%
Remainder of State	3,022	794	26%
Rhode Island	5,325	1,368	26%

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, 2020 and December 31, 2020.

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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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.²¹

Domestic Homicide and Guns

◆ When firearms are present in domestic violence situations, victims are six times more likely to die.²²

◆ 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.²³