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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT to release new *Issue Brief*: *Infants and Toddlers in the Child Welfare System in Rhode Island*

Nearly one in four victims of child abuse and neglect are infants and toddlers under age three.

Rhode Island's Safe and Secure Baby Court was created to help address the needs of these vulnerable babies and their families.

Providence, RI (February 6, 2019): Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release its newest publication, *Infants and Toddlers in the Child Welfare System in Rhode Island* at a policy roundtable on Thursday, February 7, 2019 from 1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI.

Featured speakers will include Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT; Trista Piccola, Director, Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF); The Honorable Lia Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice, Rhode Island Family Court; and Susan Dickstein, President, Rhode Island Association for Infant Mental Health. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Senior Policy Analyst Leanne Barrett will share findings from the *Issue Brief*.

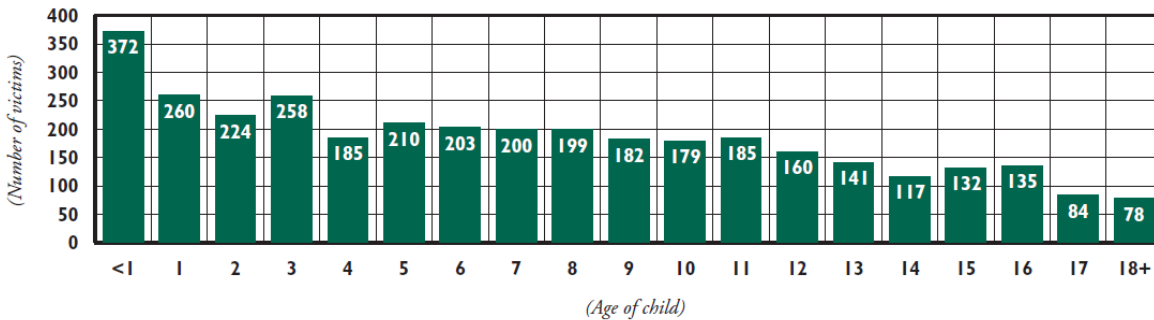
The first 1,000 days of a child's life are crucial.

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of great opportunity and great vulnerability. Experiences during the first three years are critical to healthy brain development and positive relationships with parents and caregivers and lay the foundation for social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development.

Nationally and in Rhode Island, very young children are more likely to experience abuse and neglect than older children. In Rhode Island in 2018, nearly one in four victims of child abuse and neglect were infants and toddlers under age three (856 out of 3,505 victims). Children who experience maltreatment at a very young age can experience challenges forming positive attachments and relationships, which are crucial for healthy brain development and emotional security.

“Rhode Island KIDS COUNT’s *Issue Brief* provides key data and information for policymakers about what infants, toddlers, and their families need to thrive,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Rhode Island has many areas in which it excels for children, such as access to high-quality, comprehensive health coverage. But the fact that 856 infants and toddlers were victims of child abuse and neglect in 2018 is unacceptable. We need to strongly focus on prevention, as well as on strategies to improve outcomes for children already in the child welfare system.”

Child Abuse and Neglect by Age of Victim, Rhode Island, 2018



Many parents at risk of child abuse and neglect lack essential parenting skills and are struggling with a combination of social and economic issues. These families can benefit from programs that enhance social and economic supports, parental resilience, and knowledge of parenting and child development. In addition, providing access to child care, early childhood learning programs, and evidence-based home visiting programs to families with multiple risk factors can prevent the occurrence and recurrence of child abuse and neglect. Cross-agency efforts can support children who are known or at risk of involvement in the child welfare system by streamlining access to programs such as First Connections, Early Intervention, Family Home Visiting, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services.

Rhode Island's Safe and Secure Baby Court

In March 2017, the Rhode Island Family Court initiated the Safe and Secure Baby Court (SSBC) pilot to support young, first-time parents of infants birth to age 12 months. This project was informed by the collective knowledge and expertise of representatives from the Rhode Island Association for Infant Mental Health, the Department of Health, and court staff about the best strategies for addressing intergenerational child abuse.

The supports and services provided to parents through the SSBC help young parents by focusing on safety and attachment between parents and baby. One of the goals of the SSBC is to break the generational cycle of child welfare involvement for young parents with a history of involvement in the child welfare system. The SSBC combines rapid referrals with tailored case plans, frequent visitation between parents and children, and frequent court reviews in order to support, safely reunify, and close cases as efficiently as possible.

The Rhode Island Family Court uses existing resources, including recommending participation in evidence-based home visiting programs that address family challenges and support positive child development, to ensure that services continue after case closure. Parents involved in the SSBC also can access donated diapers, baby supplies, and books directly from the Family Court on their court dates to assist with the financial costs of a new baby. As of November 2018, 89% of the cases that have closed to SSBC have not had any further DCYF involvement.

"The Safe and Secure Baby Court leverages the power of creative partnerships for the benefit of the baby," said Susan Dickstein, Susan Dickstein, President of the Rhode Island Association for Infant

Mental Health. “The idea is to improve collaboration among the court, child welfare, health and infant mental health providers, and other community resources to expedite and enhance services to help parents cope with challenges and heal, a key component for building healthy relationships with their babies. When parents are engaged as respected members of the team, it becomes more likely that the developmental needs of their babies are met. We take a stance that most parents really want to be the best parents they can be and want their babies to do well. The Safe and Secure Baby Court helps give them that chance.”

Recommendations

The *Issue Brief* provides key recommendations to support infants and toddlers involved in the child welfare system:

- **Prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect** by expanding the use of evidence-based and trauma-informed programming for young children and families at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system.
- **Through the Safe and Secure Baby Court and other mechanisms at DCYF, ensure infants and toddlers who have been maltreated receive:**
 - Parent and family services and supports that **address family and parent trauma, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence issues**. Parent-child relationship therapy is also an essential service for most young children who have been neglected or abused.
 - **Expedited permanent placement in a safe, stable, and loving home** with consistent, nurturing parents/caregivers. Policies to promote permanency include: supportive programs for biological parents, frequent visitation with biological parents when in out-of-home placement, and concurrent planning for placement with more than one good choice.
 - Attention to **medical care** and physical health and participation in **high-quality early childhood programs and services** to promote positive development and learning.
- Provide in-depth **training on the unique developmental needs of maltreated infants and toddlers** to Family Court judicial leaders and staff, court-appointed advocates, child welfare leaders, supervisors, and caseworkers, and direct service providers
- **Ensure services and supports are routinely provided to birth, foster, and adoptive families**. When children are reunified with biological parents ongoing services to address the factors that brought the families to the child welfare system in the first place – poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, mental health problems, domestic violence, and/or little or no social support available in times of stress – are usually needed for long-term success.
- **Ensure that DCYF has adequate funding** to support very young children and their families who enter the child welfare system.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.