

# 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 10 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>12</sup> In Rhode Island in 2015 (the most recent year for which full data are available), police reports indicate that children were present at 28% of domestic violence incidents resulting in arrests.<sup>3</sup>

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 who are exposed to domestic violence are also more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect than those who are not.<sup>4,5</sup> Children may

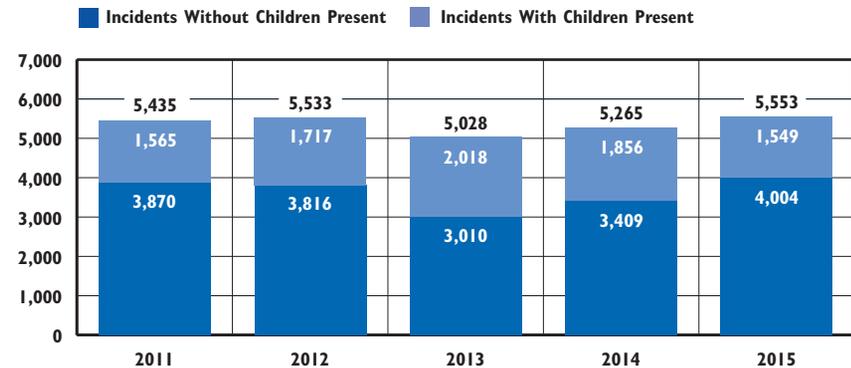
also lose a parent to domestic homicide.<sup>6,7</sup>

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>8,9,10</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. There is a strong association between witnessing domestic violence as a child and becoming a perpetrator of domestic violence as an adult.<sup>11,12</sup>

Incidents of domestic violence are historically under-reported. Nationally, it is estimated that 41% of family violence incidents are not reported to police.<sup>13</sup> Rhode Island data suggest similar under-reporting of the number of domestic violence incidents witnessed by children because not all incidents are reported to police and children may be unwilling to admit that they witnessed the incident.<sup>14</sup>

## Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrest, Rhode Island, 2011-2015



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2011-2015. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

◆ In Rhode Island in 2015, there were 5,553 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, up 5% from 5,265 incidents in 2014. Children were reported present in 28% (1,549) of incidents in 2015.<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 2015, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,130 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,255 arrests. These incidents were not mutually exclusive, and more than one child may have witnessed each incident.<sup>17</sup>

◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of five domestic violence shelters and advocacy programs provides services to victims, including shelter, transitional housing, advocacy, individual and group counseling, and assistance with the legal system.<sup>18</sup> During 2017, the network provided services to 8,758 individuals, including 604 children (up from 8,710 and 447, respectively, in 2016). In 2017, 261 children and 278 adults spent a total of 26,758 nights in domestic violence shelters. During 2017, 117 children and 111 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) for a total of 21,688 nights.<sup>19</sup>

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Table 30. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2015

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF REPORTS	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	37	16	43%
Bristol	85	17	20%
Burrillville	62	19	31%
Central Falls	147	41	28%
Charlestown	30	9	30%
Coventry	125	45	36%
Cranston	357	86	24%
Cumberland	120	43	36%
East Greenwich	36	9	25%
East Providence	271	83	31%
Exeter**	NA	NA	NA
Foster	15	6	40%
Glocester	14	4	29%
Hopkinton	44	15	34%
Jamestown	6	3	50%
Johnston	126	22	17%
Lincoln	51	20	39%
Little Compton	9	4	44%
Middletown	98	19	19%
Narragansett	68	18	26%
New Shoreham	207	61	29%
Newport	4	1	25%
North Kingstown	79	18	23%
North Providence	187	54	29%
North Smithfield	53	12	23%
Pawtucket	764	204	27%
Portsmouth	99	19	19%
Providence	942	290	31%
Richmond	31	11	35%
Scituate	20	7	35%
Smithfield	47	9	19%
South Kingstown	80	26	33%
Tiverton	68	25	37%
Warren	67	17	25%
Warwick	310	89	29%
West Greenwich	155	45	29%
West Warwick	18	4	22%
Westerly	268	71	26%
Woonsocket*	362	86	24%
Rhode Island State Police	91	21	23%
Four Core Cities	2,215	621	28%
Remainder of State	3,247	907	28%
Rhode Island	5,553	1,549	28%

## 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, 2015 and December 31, 2015.

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.

\*Data for Woonsocket are provisional.

\*\*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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- <sup>6,8</sup> Wathen, C. N. & MacMillan, H. L. (2013). Children's exposure to intimate partner violence: Impacts and interventions. *Pediatrics & Child Health, 18*(8), 419-422.

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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.<sup>20</sup>

## Domestic Homicide and Guns

◆ When firearms are present in a domestic violence situation, women are five times more likely to die.<sup>21</sup> Between 2006-2015, forty-two percent of Rhode Island women killed by intimate partners were shot to death.<sup>22</sup>

◆ Under the Protect Rhode Island Families Act, convicted domestic abusers are restricted from owning firearms. Signed into law in 2017, this legislation requires that domestic abusers convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence crimes and those subject to court-issued final protective orders, forfeit any guns in their possession within 24 hours.<sup>23</sup>