

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

It is estimated that up to 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.^{1,2} In Rhode Island in 2022 (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 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.^{4,5,6} Children who are exposed to domestic

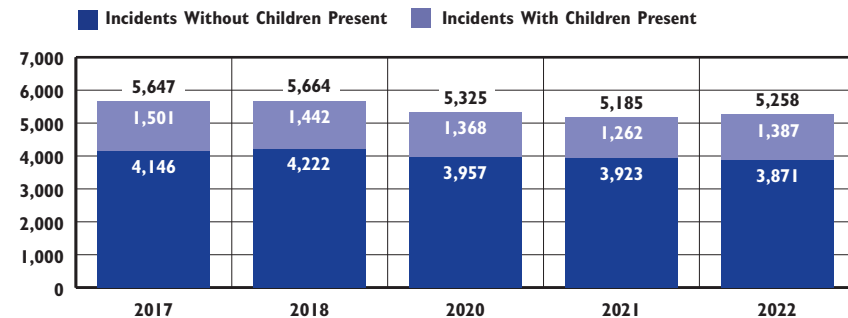
violence are often victims of physical abuse, and they are at an increased risk of entering into abusive relationships or becoming an abuser themselves.^{7,8}

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. This cycle can be broken through honest conversations with — and positive coping strategies taught by — supportive adults.^{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, 2017-2018, 2020-2022



Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022. Includes domestic violence reports resulting in an arrest by local police and Rhode Island State Police.

★ In Rhode Island in 2022, there were 5,258 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, similar to the number of incidents in the previous year (5,185). Children were reported present in 26% (1,387) of incidents in 2022.¹⁵ 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 2022, police reported that children saw the domestic violence incident in 1,012 arrests and children heard the incident in 1,127 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 2023, Rhode Island's domestic violence shelters provided services to 11,094 individuals, including 495 children. In 2023, 160 children and 188 adults spent a total of 23,869 nights in domestic violence shelters, 75 children and 67 adults lived in domestic violence transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence). Forty-nine children and adults moved into permanent supportive housing, and 255 accessed Rapid Re-housing.^{19,20}

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Table 29. Children Present During Domestic Violence Incidents Resulting in Arrests, Rhode Island, 2022

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST	TOTAL # OF INCIDENTS RESULTING IN ARREST WITH CHILDREN PRESENT	% WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	23	11	48%
Bristol	63	8	13%
Burrillville	78	25	32%
Central Falls	113	37	33%
Charlestown	27	6	22%
Coventry	141	34	24%
Cranston	264	63	24%
Cumberland	105	28	27%
East Greenwich	20	7	35%
East Providence	208	56	27%
Exeter*	NA	NA	NA
Foster	21	4	19%
Glocester	22	9	41%
Hopkinton	11	3	27%
Jamestown	6	3	50%
Johnston	136	26	19%
Lincoln	73	21	29%
Little Compton	4	1	25%
Middletown	56	16	29%
Narragansett	33	9	27%
New Shoreham	9	2	22%
Newport	131	18	14%
North Kingstown	69	12	17%
North Providence	162	42	26%
North Smithfield	56	18	32%
Pawtucket	702	185	26%
Portsmouth	93	21	23%
Providence	1,106	340	31%
Richmond	18	7	39%
Scituate	15	4	27%
Smithfield	50	10	20%
South Kingstown	87	10	11%
Tiverton	63	18	29%
Warren	59	14	24%
Warwick	377	96	25%
West Greenwich	9	2	22%
West Warwick	272	77	28%
Westerly	135	28	21%
Woonsocket	404	112	28%
Rhode Island State Police	37	4	11%
Four Core Cities	2,325	674	29%
Remainder of State	2,896	709	24%
Rhode Island	5,258	1,387	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, 2022 and December 31, 2022.

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 but are not included in the Remainder of State totals.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

References

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (2023). *Domestic violence and children*. Retrieved March 28, 2024, from aacap.org
- Berger, A., Wildsmith, E., Manlove, J., & Steward-Streng, N. (2012). *Relationship violence among young adult couples*. Retrieved March 9, 2024, from childtrends.org
- ^{3,15,17} Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit. Based on data from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms, 2017-2018, 2020-2022.
- ⁴ National Domestic Violence Hotline. (n.d.). *Children as an abusive mechanism*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from thehotline.org
- ^{5,9} National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2023). *Domestic violence and children*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from ncadv.org
- ^{6,14} Zeoli, A. (2018). *Children, domestic violence, and guns*. Minneapolis, MN: The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and Firearms.

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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 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.²¹



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.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