

CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

THE PROBLEM 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. Domestic violence can also include sexual abuse, emotional abuse and financial abuse. Domestic violence is a serious social issue that affects all communities and cuts across racial, ethnic and economic lines. It is estimated that one in four of all women are assaulted by a partner or ex-partner during their lifetime. In Rhode Island in 1999, there were 7,363 domestic violence incidents reported to police.



HOW DOES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AFFECT CHILDREN?

Children exposed to domestic violence in their homes suffer trauma even if they, themselves, are not physically harmed. They may witness their mother being abused, hear their mother's cries or a batterer's threats, and/or observe the results of a violent event through their mother's injuries or broken furniture. National surveys of mothers show that in homes where there is domestic violence, 87% of children have witnessed the abuse.

Exposure to domestic violence can limit children's cognitive development and their ability to form close attachments. Children who witness domestic violence may experience anxiety, fear, sleep disruption, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and have problems in school. Some studies of young males have linked witnessing violence at home to youth violence and adult criminal behavior. In addition to the effects on children from witnessing violence, children in homes where a parent is abusive to a partner are at increased risk of child abuse. It is estimated that more than half of the perpetrators who abuse their partner also abuse their children.

Children may also experience a great deal of instability when a parent escapes an abusive home. A 1990 study by the Ford Foundation found that 50% of homeless women and children were fleeing domestic violence. In Rhode Island in 1999, 42% of the families seeking shelter at a homeless shelter reported that they were fleeing domestic violence; 387 Rhode Island children spent time in a domestic violence shelter; and 1,335 children received services from domestic violence agencies.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERFERES WITH HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Exposure to domestic violence affects child development in a range of ways. Factors that affect how a child responds to exposure to domestic violence include: the child's proximity to the violence (what the child saw and heard), the age of the child at the time of the exposure, the severity and frequency of the violence, and the availability of adults to emotionally support and protect the child. Studies comparing children exposed to domestic violence with children from non-violent homes have found that exposed children exhibit differences in:

- ***Behavior.*** Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to be aggressive and to exhibit behavior problems in school and the community. They are also more likely to have problems such as depression, suicidal behavior, anxiety, fears, insomnia, bedwetting and low self-esteem.
- ***Intellectual and Academic Performance.*** Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to demonstrate an inability to concentrate, difficulty with schoolwork, and significantly lower verbal, motor and cognitive skills.
- ***Social Development with Peers and Adults.*** Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to have lower levels of problem-solving skills and empathy than children who grow up in non-violent homes.



EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN VARY BY AGE AND GENDER

Infants

- Have a propensity to illness, irritability and sleep problems.
- May experience separation anxiety because the victim of abuse may have difficulty addressing their needs.
- May be injured in a battering incident if they are caught between parents.

Toddlers

- May feel responsible for the violence, yet may be open to discuss their feelings.
- May be reluctant to leave their mother, fear being alone, and regress to earlier stages of development.

Elementary School Children

- May suffer from emotional problems, including a sense of shame and guilt out of a belief that they should be able to prevent the violence.
- Boys may learn that violence is an appropriate way to resolve conflict. They are often disruptive and act aggressively toward people, pets and objects.
- Girls may learn that victimization is inevitable. They are likely to be withdrawn, passive and cling to their mother.

Teenagers

- May run away or may feel that they cannot leave home because they must protect their mothers or younger siblings.
- May engage in delinquent behavior and become involved with the juvenile justice system.
- Boys may become abusive in their dating relationships or may model their abusive parent's behavior toward their mothers or sisters.
- Girls may accept threats and violence from boyfriends.

Source: Wilson, K.H. "The Effects of Family Violence on Children" in *When Violence Begins at Home*. Hunter House.



VIOLENCE IS LEARNED

- Children who grow up in violent homes learn that violence is an effective tool of control over others.
- Children exposed to domestic violence are much more likely to become abusive partners or victims of abuse in adulthood. Over 80% of abusive partners had themselves either been victims of child abuse or had witnessed their mothers being abused.
- In a study of the effects of domestic violence on adolescent violent behavior, 70% of adolescents who grew up in homes with domestic violence reported involvement in violent delinquent behavior compared with 49% of teens who grew up in non-violent homes.



TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

The problem of domestic violence is not limited to adults. As teens become engaged in dating relationships, some may practice the abusive and violent patterns that they have learned at home.

- Over one-third of teenagers in dating relationships have experienced some physical abuse.
- In 1997-98 the RI Department of Health, the University of Rhode Island Family Violence Research Program, and the Rhode Island Student Assistance Program conducted a study on the prevalence of teen dating violence among middle-school students. The study found that of the 50% of students who reported having dated, 14% reported that they were victims or perpetrators of teen dating violence.
- Teen dating violence is highly underreported. In one survey of teens, over 30% told no one at all about being victimized. Less than 3% of teenagers reported a violent event to an authority figure (police, social worker, teacher or counselor). Three percent told a family member about the incident.
- Common indicators of teen dating violence are: physical abuse, such as shoving, hitting and punching; verbal abuse, such as yelling and put-downs; emotional abuse, such as spreading rumors and lying to peers about the victim; sexual abuse, such as unwanted touching; and psycho-logical abuse, such as manipulation and blame.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN

- Research shows that early intervention with children who have been exposed to domestic violence that focuses on teaching children non-violent conflict resolution helps to restore empathy and self-control, and minimizes the risk of a repeated cycle of violence.
- In Rhode Island, there are six shelter and advocacy programs that offer services to children who witness domestic violence. These services include group therapy, individual counseling, expressive arts therapy, and child care. The shelters also offer school-based prevention programs.
- Key elements of successful school-based prevention programs that address domestic violence include: acknowledging that domestic violence is an abuse of power and control; creating a high level of trust so that children can disclose exposure to domestic violence and teachers can make referrals; and encouraging the development of anger management and conflict resolution skills.
- In a Rhode Island study of teens who participated in a teen dating prevention program participants scored significantly higher than non-participants in knowledge of teen dating violence, recognition of abusive behavior, and intent to leave abusive relationships.

STRATEGIES FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

All systems serving children and families have a role to play in preventing and treating domestic violence. Strategies for improving the identification of and support services for families and children experiencing domestic violence include:

- Ensure stable funding sources to support comprehensive and coordinated community-based services for battered women and their children.
- Establish screening and assessment protocols in health and mental health care settings and train health care professionals to identify women and children experiencing domestic violence.
- Develop strong collaboration between child protective services and domestic violence agencies to ensure that services provide safety and stability to the child and support the battered woman in pursuing safety and self-sufficiency.
- Provide ongoing training on domestic violence and its effects on children to all professionals who have regular contact with families and children, including teachers and child care providers, health and mental health providers, law enforcement officers, child welfare workers, and court personnel.

Source: Carter, L.S, et al., "Domestic Violence and Children: Analysis and Recommendations." *The Future of Children: Children and Domestic Violence*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1999). Los Altos, CA: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE

Children in homes where a parent is abusive to a spouse are at increased risk of child abuse.

- It is estimated that 50% to 70% of children exposed to domestic violence are also victims of child abuse. The more severe the abuse of the mother, the more severe the child abuse.
- Perpetrators of domestic violence often threaten or intentionally injure children as a means of intimidating and controlling their adult partner. Children in households with domestic violence are also at increased risk of sexual abuse.
- Older children are often injured when they attempt to intervene to protect their mothers.
- Mothers who are battered may be more likely to physically abuse their children than mothers who are not battered.
- Even when a child is not physically abused, domestic violence can interfere with parenting to such a degree that a child may be neglected. When a parent is experiencing serious trauma, such as domestic violence, her ability to play a stable role in a child's life may be compromised. Abused parents may be depressed, frightened, unable to deal with their own trauma, and emotionally unavailable to their children.
- As child protective service agencies work to provide a safe environment for a child, it is critical that procedures are in place to train caseworkers to identify domestic violence in the home, assess the risks to the child associated with the violence, and to develop a safety plan that includes both the mother and the child when the mother has not been abusive.
- Collaboration between child protective services and the domestic violence community is important in order to create safe and effective responses to difficult cases that involve both domestic violence and child abuse.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND WELFARE REFORM

While domestic violence occurs in all socioeconomic groups, poverty is associated with domestic violence in two ways. Poverty makes women and children more vulnerable to domestic violence and less able to leave an abusive home since women may be economically dependent on perpetrators. Domestic violence may also make it more difficult for a woman to work due to physical and emotional injury and social isolation caused by the perpetrator's control and domination.

- National studies show that 50% to 60% of welfare recipients report that they have experienced domestic violence by a current or former partner.
- Finding and keeping a job is extremely difficult for women when their lives are continually interrupted by violence. Victims suffer from low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, and other behaviors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which affect productivity and the ability to maintain work.
- The federal welfare reform law (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) allows states to exempt welfare recipients from work requirements where there is a hardship. In the U.S., nearly 40% of current physical abuse victims receiving welfare report that their partner actively prevents them from participating in education and training programs.
- The Rhode Island Family Independence Program, Rhode Island's welfare reform program, has adopted a "Family Violence Option" which allows work requirements to be waived for welfare recipients who are victims of domestic violence and requires that recipients be given notice of this waiver. Women who indicate interest in the waiver and/or domestic violence services are immediately referred to a family violence advocate from the Women's Center of Rhode Island.

RHODE ISLAND RESOURCES

The following are some of the Rhode Island organizations committed to helping victims of domestic violence and their children.

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV), established in 1979, supports Rhode Island's shelters for battered women in statewide planning and development. This organization also works with victims directly through an advocacy program in the District Court. For more information call 401-467-9940.

The Rhode Island Attorney General's Domestic Violence Task Force was created in 1993 to improve awareness, prevention, reform and accountability on the issue of domestic violence. The Task Force introduces legislation to improve the criminal justice system and has coordinated the creation of *Batterers Intervention Guidelines*. For more information call Stacey Veroni at 401-274-4400, x2332.

Domestic Violence Shelters. There are six shelters and advocacy programs in Rhode Island that offer services to women and children who have experienced domestic violence. The following are the shelters located in Rhode Island:

Blackstone Shelter: 401-723-3057

Elizabeth Buffum Chace House:
401-738-9700

Sojourner House: 401-861-6191

Women's Center of Rhode Island:
401-861-2760

Women's Resource Center of South County: 401-782-3995

Women's Resource Center of Newport & Bristol Counties: 401-846-5263

The Sexual Assault & Trauma Resource Center provides support, information and referrals, accompaniment to court, hospitals and police; has a **24-hour hotline (1-800-494-8100)** and coordinates the Rhode Island Children's Advocacy Center which provides services for child victims of sexual abuse. For more information call 401-421-4100.

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE

LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Over the past decade, Rhode Island has been part of a national movement to improve law enforcement responses to domestic violence.
- Law enforcement programs are beginning to identify and respond to the needs of children who witness domestic violence. Documentation by police responding to domestic violence calls where children are present is an important part of law enforcement response. It can facilitate referrals for children to needed services, serve as evidence in a criminal case, and assist policymakers in measuring the extent of the problem and developing solutions.
- In Rhode Island, police use special domestic violence reporting forms that include boxes to check if children are witnesses. The police officer may check any combination of three boxes: “Were children present during the incident?” “Did children witness the incident?” “Did children hear the incident?”
- Police officers in many locations are now receiving training in ways to respond to children who witness domestic violence. The Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit offers training to police in Rhode Island.



RHODE ISLAND CUSTODY AND VISITATION LAWS PROTECTING CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

When an abused parent leaves a violent home, there is often a dispute about custody and visitation arrangements for children in the household. State laws and court decisions about custody and visitation have a major impact on children affected by domestic violence. If the issue of domestic violence is not considered in custody and visitation decisions, victims may be afraid to leave their abusers for fear of losing their children, children may be used by perpetrators to control the victim, and custody and visitation decisions may harm rather than protect children. Rhode Island law requires that the effects of domestic violence on children be considered in determining custody and visitation.

- When the Family Court determines a custody and visitation arrangement, it must consider evidence of past or present domestic violence. If the court finds that domestic violence has occurred it must consider this evidence as not in the best interests of the child in determining custody and visitation arrangements.
- When prior or current domestic violence has been proven, custody and visitation must be arranged so that the child and the abused parent are protected from further harm. This may include ordering supervised visitation to ensure that the mother is not harmed when exchanging the child, and the child is not harmed during the visit.
- Supervised visitation is when another person must be present during the visit between a parent and child. In the most serious cases, the court may order court supervised visitation, where a professional from the court’s Family Services Unit or another agency supervises the visit at the courthouse. The court may also order privately-supervised visitation where a supervisor is present during a visit at the parent’s home or another location.
- A Rhode Island law passed in 1999 provides that in custody and visitation orders, judges may require that a perpetrator complete a certified batterers’ intervention program and/or a substance abuse program.
- The court may order that the address and phone number of the victim and the child be kept confidential when addressing custody and visitation issues. Judges may also require that a bond be filed to ensure the safe return of a child from a visit with a perpetrator.

POLICE REPORTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN RHODE ISLAND

- Based on police reports from cities and towns in Rhode Island between January 1, 1999 and December 31, 1999, children were present during 2,716 (37%) of the 7,163 reported cases of domestic violence.

- Police officers report that in 1,630 incidents the children saw their parent being abused. In 262 incidents, the children only heard, but did not see their parent being abused.

- This table underrepresents the number of incidents of domestic violence in which a child was present because police reports are not fully completed in all cases and many cases of domestic violence are never reported.

- This table underestimates the total number of children who experience domestic violence in their homes since more than one child may be present at the incident.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT, RHODE ISLAND, 1999

CITY/TOWN	DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENT REPORTS	INCIDENTS WITH CHILD PRESENT	% OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILD PRESENT
Barrington	49	14	29%
Bristol	124	57	46%
Burrillville	68	21	31%
Central Falls	183	84	46%
Charlestown	54	24	44%
Coventry	200	72	36%
Cranston	412	155	38%
Cumberland	122	42	34%
East Greenwich	38	15	40%
East Providence	265	125	47%
Exeter	n/a	n/a	n/a
Foster	12	5	42%
Glocester	51	24	47%
Hopkinton	36	18	50%
Jamestown	15	6	40%
Johnston	375	122	33%
Lincoln	63	33	52%
Little Compton	9	2	22%
Middletown	145	39	27%
Narragansett	74	19	26%
Newport	417	143	34%
New Shoreham	16	3	19%
North Kingstown	214	83	39%
North Providence	211	68	32%
North Smithfield	56	21	38%
Pawtucket	847	329	39%
Portsmouth	156	53	34%
Providence	944	304	32%
Richmond	14	10	71%
Scituate	34	16	47%
Smithfield	115	43	37%
South Kingstown	59	24	41%
Tiverton	87	20	23%
Warren	287	102	36%
Warwick	464	169	36%
Westerly	241	81	34%
West Greenwich	16	8	50%
West Warwick	333	144	43%
Woonsocket	557	218	39%
Core Cities	2,948	1,078	37%
Remainder of State	4,417	1,638	37%
Rhode Island	7,363	2,716	37%

Source: The Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms, received between January 1, 1999 and December 31, 1999; Injury Control Program, Rhode Island Department of Health, Violence Against Women Public Health Surveillance System. Core Cities are Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket and Newport.



REFERENCES

Carter, J., et al. (1992). *Domestic Violence in Civil Court Cases: A National Model for Judicial Education*. San Francisco: The Family Violence Prevention Fund.

National Coalition for the Homeless (April 1999). *Factsheet #8: Domestic Violence and Homelessness*.

Edleson, J. (1998) *The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Abuse*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse.

The Future of Children: Domestic Violence and Children, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1999). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Hart, Barbara. (1996) *Children of Domestic Violence: Risks and Remedies*. Child Protective Services Quarterly. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Bar Association.

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Report to the President of the American Bar Association (1994). Chicago: American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1994). *Factsheet #21: Violent Families and Youth Violence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Raphael, J. & Haennicke, S. (September 1999). *Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How Are We Doing?* Washington, DC: The Taylor Institute.

Sachs, H. (December 1999). *Domestic Violence as a Barrier to Women's Self-Sufficiency*. Welfare Information Network.

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (1997) *Children and Domestic Violence; The Prevalence and Severity of Domestic Violence; Teen Dating Violence; Welfare and Domestic Violence* (Fact Sheets).

Rhode Island Legal Services, Inc. & Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2000). *Safe Visitation: A Guide for Helping You in Family Court*.

Sousa, C. (1997). *Teen Dating Violence*. Waltham, MA: Massachusetts Medical Society.

Wilson, K.J., (1997) "The Effects of Family Violence on Children," in *When Violence Begins at Home*. Hunter House Publications.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For assistance with this Issue Brief we thank: Deborah DeBare, Francie Mantak, Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Wendy Verhoek-Oftedahl, Rhode Island Department of Health; Janice Dubois, Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit; Lynn Almanzor, Lori Myren-Manbeck, Bob Kendall, Vanessa Benway, Newport Women's Center; Richard Hillman, RI Department of Children, Youth and Families; Debra Stone, RI Department of Health; Eric Hirsch, Providence College.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a children's policy and advocacy organization that provides information on child well-being, stimulates dialogue on children's issues, and promotes accountability and action. Primary funding for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is provided by The Rhode Island Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Additional funding is provided by the United Way of Southeastern New England, Prince Charitable Trusts, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational LAB at Brown University, Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other corporate, foundation and individual sponsors.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Staff

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Director
Catherine Boisvert Walsh, Program Director
Wilsa Galarza, Administrative Assistant
Liz Tobin Tyler, Policy Analyst
Laura Beavers, Research Analyst
Cyd McKenna, Research Associate
Dorothy Stamper, Covering Kids Project Director
Margaret Merrifield, Program Assistant

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
Phone: 401-351-9400
Fax: 401-351-1758
E-Mail: rikids@rikidscount.org
website: www.rikidscount.org