Policy Brief

Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Human Trafficking

July 2026

Introduction

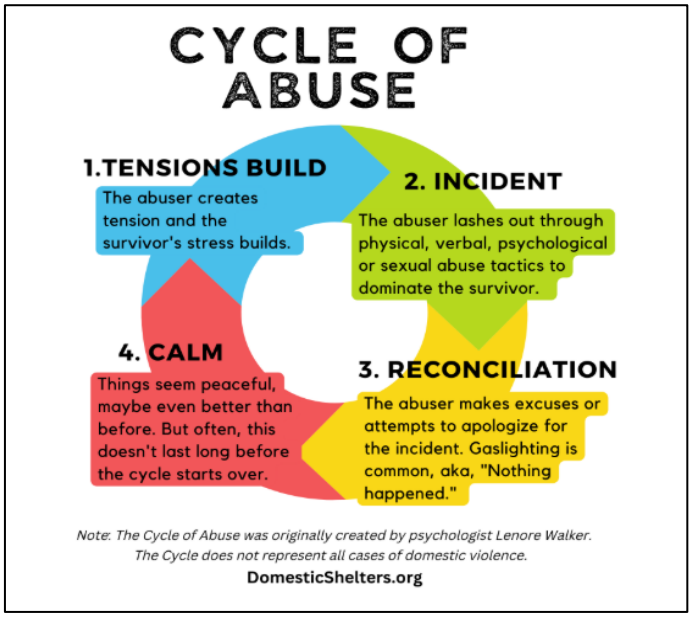
This briefing provides key facts, constituent impact, and priority policy actions to prevent and respond to domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking in our state.

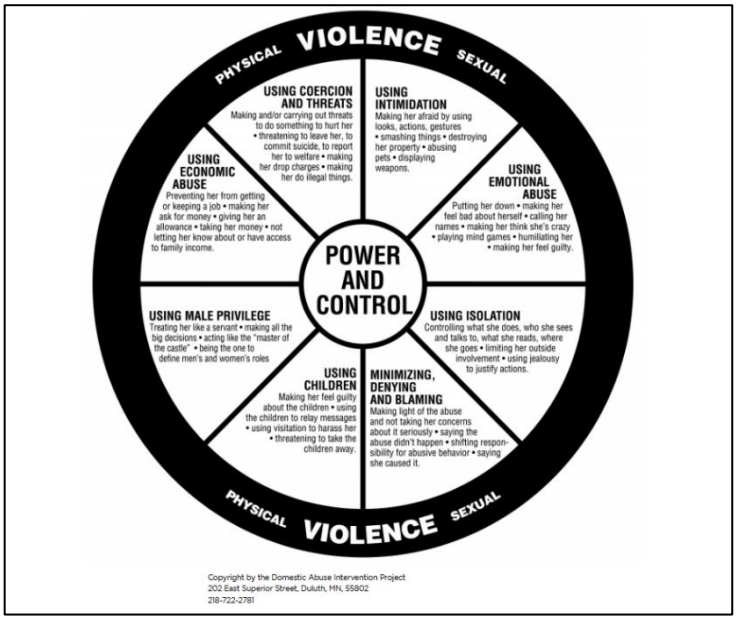
Domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking, and homelessness are deeply interconnected public health, safety, and economic issues in both the United States and Rhode Island. These issues are driven not only by individual circumstances but also by structural factors such as housing costs, poverty, economic inequality, and limited access to prevention-focused services.

In Rhode Island, these challenges are particularly visible due to high housing costs, concentrated poverty in urban areas, and documented service demand that exceeds available prevention and response capacity. Across all four issue areas, data show disproportionate impacts on women, marginalized racial and ethnic communities, children, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence involves patterns of coercive control, including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse. Professionals in direct and in-direct roles working with survivors of domestic violence often cite the “power and control wheel” and the “cycle of violence” when talking about the different forms that domestic violence can take.[i,ii]





Rates of Domestic Violence

Nationally, more than **1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men** experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.[iii]

In Rhode Island:

- Approximately **1 in 2 Rhode Island women and 2 in 5 men** have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime.[iii] Over one-third (41.4%) of women and 40% of men in RI have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner.[iii] Over one-quarter (27%) of Rhode Island women report experiencing stalking in their lifetime.[iii]
    - **Compared to any other New England state, Rhode Island ranks highest in intimate partner violence**.[iv]
- Men are identified as perpetrators in nearly all (84%) domestic violence cases in Rhode Island.[v]
- In 2024, of the 5,511 domestic violence incidents reported to police in Rhode Island, children were reported present at 24% (or 1,321) of incidents leading to an arrest highlighting the critical effect that domestic violence has on entire families as witnessing domestic violence is linked with a host of negative outcomes for children.[vi]
- Domestic violence survivors are at a heightened risk of **reproductive coercion** which often involves limiting reproductive health decisions by a partner (e.g., "breaking or removing a condom during intercourse", preventing a partner from getting an abortion, "withholding finances needed to purchase birth control", and more).[vii,viii]

Escalation of Violence

- Research shows that repeated incidents of domestic violence are strongly associated with escalation in severity, increased risk of serious injury, and a higher likelihood of homicide.[ix,x]
    - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies prior domestic violence as one of the most significant risk factors for intimate partner homicide, underscoring that patterns of violence tend to grow more dangerous over time if not interrupted early and effectively.[xi]

Financial, Economic, & Housing Barriers

- Domestic violence is a leading driver of homelessness, particularly for women and children.[xii,xiii]
    - **Housing remains the number one barrier to finding safety outside of a violent relationship** and the lack of available housing contributing to homelessness can lead to further sexual victimization and abuse.[xiv,xv,xvi]
    - The lack of affordable housing throughout RI is evidenced by Sojourner House's inability to meet 89%, or 1,565, of Rhode Islanders seeking to flee abuse in 2025 simply because we did not have housing or shelter resources available at the time they called.

- When people do attempt to leave or seek help with abusive relationships, it is typically at times when the violence has escalated significantly.[xvii]
    - Research shows that the rates at which people return to their abusive households increases as the lack of supportive and affordable housing available decreases.[xviii] Being brave enough to attempt to leave or ask for help for the first time without the appropriate resources available in our communities leaves people at substantial risk of experiencing increased violence and even losing their lives at the hands of their abusers.[xix]
- Those experiencing domestic violence are disproportionately low-income and nearly all (94-99%) have experienced economic abuse which is when abusers limit opportunities to work, ruin their credit, engage in behavior that results in frequent evictions on their record, and more.[xx,xxi] Therefore, the lack of deeply affordable housing in our state is at a direct detriment to those seeking a path forward out of abuse.
- The more stable, permanent housing options we can provide for families to rebuild their lives, the more successful we can become in breaking the cycle of abuse that often forces victims to return to an abusive situation.

Firearms & Domestic Violence

- In the U.S., on average, every 10 hours someone is fatally shot by an intimate partner.[xxii]
    - Compared to countries worldwide, the U.S. remains the most dangerous country for domestic violence survivors to live as they are "21 times more likely to be killed with a gun" compared to those in other similarly resourced countries.[xxii]
- Since January of 2025, nearly all domestic violence homicides in Rhode Island involved firearms.[iv] For many survivors, the presence of a gun turns ongoing abuse into a life-threatening situation. The mere presence of a firearm can increase the "risk of homicide by 500%" in domestic violence incidents.[iv]
    - While there are protections in place to prevent gun ownership among people with a domestic violence order under R.I. Gen. Laws § 11-47-5(b) and federal law 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g)(8); 921(a)(32), this does not allow for protection from the nuanced violence that is often central in domestic violence experiences (e.g., restrictions on prohibited firearms and the circulation of firearms).[xxiii]

Policy & Funding

- Only a small fraction of funding for intimate partner violence in Rhode Island (approximately 4%) is directed toward prevention, with the vast majority focused on response.[v]

- Other states have consistent line items in the state budget dedicated to addressing the needs of those experiencing domestic and sexual violence, and human trafficking.
    - For example, the Massachusetts state budget includes over $73 million dollars to fund services related to sexual assault and domestic violence. To have the equivalent support based on our population in Rhode Island, the state would need to invest about $12 million dollars.[xxiv]

Rhode Island has strong survivor services but limited prevention infrastructure, meaning demand frequently outpaces available shelter, legal advocacy, and long-term housing supports.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence includes rape, sexual assault, harassment, coercion, and other forms of unwanted sexual contact. Most incidents are perpetrated by someone known to the victim.

National Context

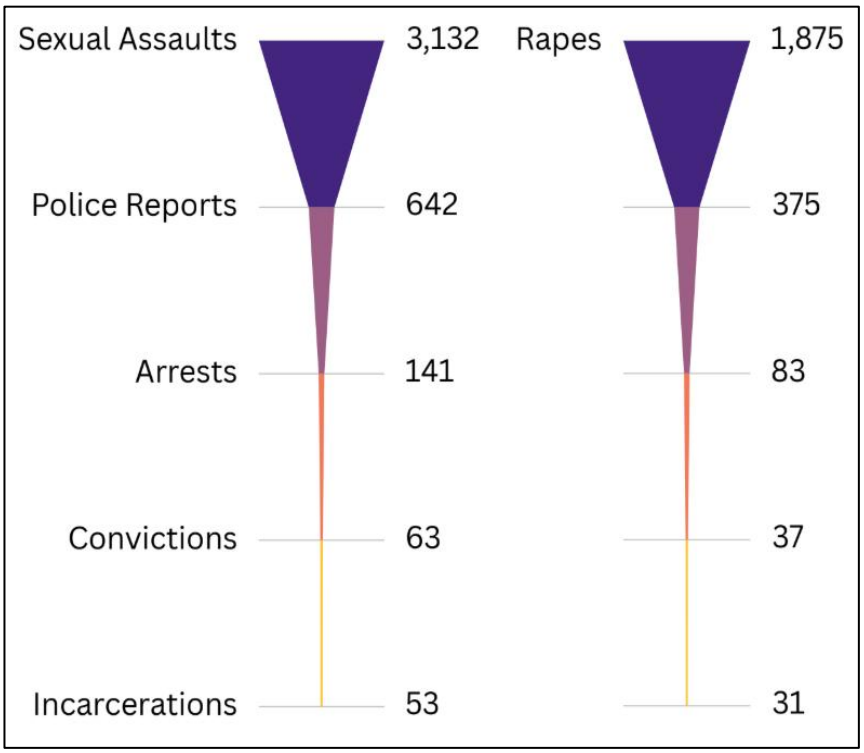
- Nearly **1 in 2 women** and **1 in 4** men in the U.S. have experienced **unwanted sexual contact** in their lifetimes.[xxv]
- In the U.S., **1 in 4 women** and **1 in 26 men** have experienced **attempted or completed rape** in their lifetimes.[xxv]
- Most (75%) victims experience first assault before age 25.[xxvi]
- Low-income women, Women of Color, and other marginalized groups of women experience sexual violence at rates exceeding their counterparts.[xxvii,xxviii]

Reporting

- **The prevalence of false reporting for sexual assault crimes is *extremely* low — between 2-10%.**[xxix] Despite this, research shows that people's perceptions of false reporting is extremely overrepresented.[xxx]
- In 2024, less than 25% of victims of sexual assault reported experiences to law enforcement, meaning over three-quarters did not disclose.[xxxi] Contributing to these low rates of reporting is a long history of victim blaming, systemic discounting of oppressed groups experiences of sexual violence, lack of tangible legal accountability, and justified distrust in the system among survivors.[xxxii,xxxiii,xxxiv,xxxv]

Sexual Violence Accountability

- Many survivors of sexual violence, particularly those harmed in institutional settings, never see their cases result in criminal charges due to barriers such as delayed disclosure, lack of evidence after many years, or statutes of limitation.[xxxvi]



- Information for the number of sexual assaults and the number of rapes in Rhode Island is based on *actual* police report numbers from 2025.

- 'Sexual Assault' includes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd – degree assault – all categories designated by RI State Law, excluding child molestation. Roughly 54% of sexual assault reports are specifically classified as Rape (1st degree).

- Estimates for the total number of assaults and rapes are calculated using a 20% reporting rate. Similarly, the number of arrests, convictions, and incarcerations are *estimates* based on justice system trends.

- **Overall, only about 1.7% of the estimated 3,000 victims see their perpetrator incarcerated.**
- Research shows that institutional transparency and public reporting are strongly associated with improved policy reforms and victim-centered responses.[xxxvii]
- Rhode Island data reflect strong overlap between sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and youth victimization, underscoring the need for integrated prevention strategies across schools, healthcare, and housing systems.

Rhode Island

- Approximately **48.5% of Rhode Island women** have experienced contact sexual violence in their lifetime.[iii]
- About 16.1% of RI women report attempted or completed rape. [iii]
- Around 20% of Rhode Island women have experienced sexual violence by an intimate partner.[iii]
- LGBTQ+ and disabled populations in Rhode Island experience significantly higher rates of sexual violence than the general population.[xxxviii]
- According the Youth Risk Behavior Survey from 2023, in Rhode Island high schools, roughly 8% of students (or nearly 2,000) responded that they've experienced forced sexual intercourse, with higher rates among women in general, Black and Hispanic women, and transgender students.[xxxix,xl]

- Rates of sexual dating violence rise to 14% among these same students with the highest rates being among women (17.7%) and transgender students (24% compared to 7% among cisgender students).[xxxix,xl]

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking involves exploitation through force, fraud, or coercion for sex or labor and is closely tied to prior trauma and economic vulnerability. Human trafficking is vastly underreported and difficult to prosecute.[xli] A majority of victims are women, and many are recruited through online platforms or trusted relationships. Prior abuse, poverty, and housing instability are common risk factors. Human trafficking survivors experience heightened risk of reproductive coercion.[xlii]

- **Psychological coercion** is one of the most common tactics used by traffickers.[xliii,xliv]
    - This coercion can include threats of harm or deportation, intimidation, manipulation of debt, wage withholding, emotional abuse, surveillance, and deliberate isolation from family, coworkers, or community supports.
- While public narratives often portray human and labor trafficking as involving kidnapping, physical restraint, or abduction by strangers, **research consistently shows that trafficking more often operates through coercion rather than overt force**.[xlv]
    - Many individuals are trafficked by employers, intimate partners, family members, or other people they know and trust.
- In addition, many people experiencing trafficking do not identify themselves as "victims" of human or labor trafficking which makes reporting and cases of human trafficking difficult to identify and prosecute.[xlvi]
    - Factors such as normalization of exploitation, fear of retaliation, economic dependence, immigration vulnerability, trauma bonding, and mistrust of authorities can shape how individuals interpret their circumstances.
- Re-victimization: Medical and public health researchers note that trafficking survivors are particularly vulnerable to being re-trafficked within about two years after exiting exploitation due to economic, emotional, and social factors that remain unresolved if not addressed with support and protections.[xlvii]

National Context

- **Tens of thousands of trafficking situations are identified annually in the U.S., but actual prevalence is significantly undercounted.**
    - Since 2007, the National trafficking hotline has identified more than 112,822 situations of human trafficking with over 218,568 victims. That's an average of over 11,500 victims per year.[xlviii]
        - 65% of the cases identified in 2024 were sex trafficking, 22% labor trafficking, and 13% both sex and labor trafficking.[xlviii]

Rhode Island

- According to The National Human Trafficking Hotline, in Rhode Island, there were 19 cases of human trafficking identified in 2024 with 25 victims involved. Since 2007, there have been about 21 victims of human trafficking each year on average (total of 393 victims).[xlix]
    - **Local providers such as Sojourner House report serving hundreds of trafficking survivors annually, suggest significant underreporting in formal systems.**
        - In 2025, we served 217 survivors of human trafficking at Sojourner House. Based on our data, it is likely that there are close to **9 times the number of victims in Rhode Island** compared to what is estimated by the National Human Trafficking Hotline.
- Survivors in Rhode Island reflect national trends: most are adults, many are U.S.-born, and trafficking frequently overlaps with domestic violence and homelessness.[xlix]
- The gap between hotline data and service provider caseloads suggests significant under-identification, reinforcing the need for increased training, screening, and cross-system coordination.

Policy & Funding

- In our work, we regularly serve individuals who have been arrested, charged, or fear arrest for conduct directly connected to their own victimization.
    - Many survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation are compelled, coerced, or manipulated into commercial sexual activity.[l] **Criminalizing these individuals does not address the root harm; instead, it compounds it.**
- Survivors of trafficking frequently avoid seeking help due to fear of arrest, prosecution, or immigration consequences.[li,lii]
    - Criminal records tied to exploitation can follow survivors for years, limiting access to housing, employment, and education.[liii]

Key Takeaways

- Underlying Systemic Contribution: Housing instability, poverty, and economic insecurity consistently increase vulnerability to violence and exploitation.
- Interconnected Systems of Harm: Domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, and homelessness frequently overlap in the same individuals and families, creating cycles of repeated victimization.
- Early Exposure and Lifelong Impact: Many survivors first experience violence in childhood or adolescence, with strong evidence linking early trauma to adult victimization, homelessness, and health disparities.

- Underreporting and Data Gaps: All four issues are significantly underreported in official systems. Rhode Island service providers consistently report higher levels of need than reflected in statewide or national datasets.
- Reactive System Design: Both nationally and in Rhode Island, funding is heavily weighted toward crisis response (shelters, legal intervention, emergency services), while prevention, housing stability, and early intervention remain underfunded.

Policy Implications for Rhode Island

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, prevention-focused strategies that reflect Rhode Island's specific conditions, particularly its housing crisis and concentrated service demand:

- Expand affordable housing supply and strengthen eviction prevention programs.
- Increase investment in prevention for domestic and sexual violence, not only crisis services.
- Strengthen cross-system screening for violence and trafficking in housing, healthcare, and education systems.
- Expand youth-focused prevention and early intervention programs in schools and communities.
- Improve wage adequacy and economic supports to reduce housing instability.
- Ensure equitable access to services for LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and Communities of Color.
- Support integrated service models that address co-occurring homelessness, violence, and exploitation.

In Rhode Island and nationally, these issues are not separate challenges but interconnected outcomes of housing instability, economic insecurity, and systemic inequities. A coordinated policy response that prioritizes prevention, housing stability, and cross-sector collaboration is essential to reducing harm and improving long-term outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

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