



St. Croix Foundation
for Community Development

Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks
Legislative Testimony
August 30th, 2024

Good Afternoon, Senator Bolques, members of the 35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands and the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks. My name is Deanna James, President and CEO at St. Croix Foundation for Community Development (SCF), and on behalf of the Foundation and our KIDS COUNT USVI Team, I submit this testimony in support of the well-being of the children of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI).

Our testimony today is framed by findings from our [2023 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book](#) coupled with 2020 Census data that we believe represent the most compelling demographic trends that should keep us all up at night... and, at the same time can serve as powerful drivers for radical interventions. In addition to presenting highlights from the data we've compiled, we also wish to outline some of the challenges our Team has faced throughout our stewardship of the territory's Kids Count initiative. We will also present future strategies to consider for addressing these challenges. Finally, our testimony also aims to foster a comprehensive understanding of the current state of child welfare in the USVI with the hope that collectively we can better mobilize and coordinate efforts to improve child outcomes.

To offer some background: St. Croix Foundation (SCF) was selected by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) to lead the KIDS COUNT (KC) initiative in the U.S. Virgin Islands in January 2020. While it was a role we did not seek out, we were told that the VI as a whole had not been effectively responsive or successful in *measurably* moving the needle on child well-being, with fidelity. As a result the territory risked losing Kids Count altogether.

KIDS COUNT® is a national initiative that tasks each territory and state with collecting and reporting local data on child well-being in four standard "domains": education, economic well-being, health, and community and family. But, from the very beginning of our stewardship of Kids Count USVI, SCF has remained laser-focused on moving beyond rote data collection and an annual publication of a Data Book in order to fulfill a broader Kids Count mandate. Not only have we been working tirelessly to design more holistic and interactive data products, but we're also focusing on conceptualizing progressive, out-of-the-box strategies for engaging key stakeholders around more collaborative and cohesive approaches for activating the data.

As we continue to evolve this work, our ultimate hope is that the lessons the Foundation has learned throughout our 34 years of social impact investments to support our children (beyond Kids Count) are lessons that will be instructive to this committee and to our wider stakeholder community. Undoubtedly, our charge is a big one, and the road to this moment has not been without its rough patches. In fact, while SCF has a track record of measurable accomplishments over the course of the past 4 years, we continue to encounter a number of tenacious challenges.

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Data Collection Challenges

Data Sourcing

Inarguably, the most intractable challenge we have had to contend with is data sourcing. On the national level, KIDS COUNT data is derived from many sources- one of the more important being the American Community Survey (ACS), a national survey conducted annually by the United States Census Bureau. Unfortunately, the ACS is not conducted in the USVI, so this vital data set that states use to complete their KIDS COUNT data reporting is not available locally.

In the absence of the ACS, the Eastern Caribbean Center of the University of the Virgin Islands conducts a Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS), collecting data similar to that included in the population and housing components of the decennial Census. Unfortunately, because the last published VICS was released in 2018 (reflecting 2015 data), our Kids Count Team has had to rely on other data sources to compile each data book. While a new VICS survey was conducted in late 2023, it has not yet been published. As a result, detailed, current demographic data (including a count of children and poverty status) have not been available for the publication of any of our three KIDS COUNT USVI Data Books.

To overcome this obstacle our KIDS COUNT team has had to work directly with private and public sector agencies to gather information pertaining to children in the USVI. To that end, in 2021 St. Croix Foundation signed a first-of-its-kind nine-agency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which currently serves as the foundation for KIDS COUNT data collection and the core of a comprehensive, local Kids Count network. One benefit of our direct data-gathering approach is that it has created an opportunity to look for more nuanced indicators and produce compelling and community-centered data books with targeted data that are specifically relevant to the USVI community. Of course, while this strategy has afforded us access to the most current, real-time data, the stark reality is that not every agency has readily available public data or reports.

Data Standardization.

Another significant challenge that we have encountered - one we know frustrates many of the government organizations we partner with around sourcing data - is the lack of standardization in data collection. Different departments and agencies often collect data in different ways, making it difficult to compare and analyze data across local government departments. To address this issue, public sector organizations may consider developing clear standards and guidelines for data collection coupled with internal controls to ensure that these standards are followed consistently throughout the organization. Some agencies manually collect data from various paper records to produce reports, and many agencies function as independent data silos. In some cases, different types of data were collected in the St. Croix District versus the St. Thomas/St. John District even within the same agency, making comparisons between our islands difficult. In other cases, agencies indicated that the data being requested was simply not available.

Data & Human Resources

Another key challenge we have noted in both the public and civic sectors is the lack of investments in personnel and training targeted towards data collection and analysis. One solution is to take a more deliberate approach to data collection, with a clear plan for what data needs to be collected, how it will be collected, and how it will be used. It also means investing in the right tools and technologies to support data collection and analysis. Finally, maintaining online portals where anonymized data can be viewed and downloaded by stakeholders will encourage greater transparency and nurture public trust, while also providing researchers with publicly available data and regular updates on data collection activities. Strengthening local data systems ultimately requires a strategic commitment and approach to standardization, training, and transparency.

Bolstered by the Foundation's deep partnerships with nonprofit organizations, coupled with our success in creating comprehensive data sharing MOUs with key Government agencies, we have developed a proposal for an online, visual analytics platform that will differentiate itself from existing siloed governmental systems - a data dashboard. Not only is it interoperable between agencies, mobile-friendly, and low-maintenance, but it can provide access to one-click report sharing for rapid dissemination of critical findings. Another unique benefit of this data dashboard is that it could incorporate data from non-governmental service providers, thus providing a richer, more comprehensive picture of the state of child and family well-being. We demoed an early version of this dashboard to attendees of our KIDS COUNT Summit, demonstrating in real time maps of the USVI overlaid with the location of schools and other community resources and their corresponding enrollment and utilization.

Data Policies, Procedures, and Hardware

In reality, the multitude of challenges surrounding local data systems, include but are not limited to the lack of access to high-speed internet connectivity, insufficient bandwidth, the scarcity of funds for technology and human resources, the instability of the local power grid, and an ongoing reliance on paper-based records. All of these obstacles have ultimately impacted and, in some instances, impaired the reliability and accessibility of data throughout the territory. Yet, overcoming them is an imperative to powering all Kids Count Partners' ability to convene around a collaborative, data-driven mission of supporting our children to successful outcomes.

For the Kids Count USVI Team, what has become abundantly evident thus far is that geographic, economic, and political factors have exacerbated the territory's ability to build and sustain comprehensive and robust data systems that facilitate efficient data collection and reporting. In truth, the issues we have presented represent a compelling national case around Data Justice (or Injustice) in the USVI, wherein marginalized communities ultimately remain underserved because of a lack of access to, and equity around, Data Systems and Data collection.

This poses significant challenges when comprehensive projects such as Kids Count USVI presuppose the existence and availability of consistent and sophisticated data systems and efficient dissemination to stakeholders upon request.

In the end, despite all these challenges, our Kids Count Team is proud to report that we have collected and reported current data (up to the reporting year in some domains of our data books), in order to accurately reflect the condition of our children's lives in real time. We are also proud of our commitment to incorporating data from nonprofit organizations across the territory in order to tell a more holistic and complete story about our children. And, equally noteworthy, we remain convicted in prioritizing data on the territory's critically important Opportunity Youth, ages 16-24.

All about the Data

Now, while we could spend time reiterating all of the most alarming data points in our [KIDS COUNT USVI Data Books](#), we've opted to highlight only a few that have represented real drivers for our Team:

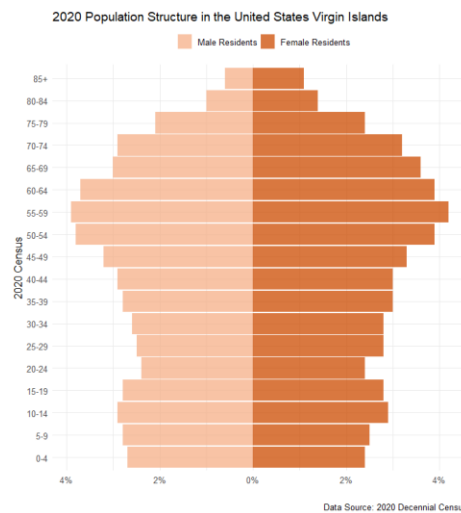
1. *Children in Poverty*: There are 5,576 children living in poverty, that's 33% of all children living in the USVI. The island of St. Croix had the highest percentage of children living in poverty with 36% of children living in families below the poverty line.
2. *Shrinking population*: In the USVI, approximately 21.3% of residents are over 65, higher than the national average (16.8%). And as of the 2020 Census, the number of children living in the USVI was half of what it was in the 2000 Census. The shrinking population has vast implications for childcare as well as to our elderly population and overall family structures. According to the 2020 Census, there were 2,650 grandparents in USVI households living with one or more of their own grandchildren. Among these grandparents, approximately half (48.2%) had been caring for grandchildren under 18 for 5 years or more.
3. *Lower academic assessment scores*: There was a sharp decline in student scores across the board in the USVI, with English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency dropping by 7.3 percentage points and math proficiency decreasing 3.9 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels. Overall, the results represent the largest decline in student academic performance since the VIDE adopted the more rigorous Smarter Balanced Assessment system based on national standards in 2016 .
4. *Increase in youth crimes*: The VIPD reported 59 incidents involving youth ages 10-17 in 2022, a slight increase from 54 in 2021. Most reported crimes in this age group were considered violent crimes. Among older youth, there were 250 incidents committed by individuals ages 18-24 in 2022, compared to 208 in 2021 for that age group. Almost all of reported crimes for this age group (243) were considered violent crimes (e.g., homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault). In 2022, there were 3 arrests of youth ages 18-24 for suspected homicide.

All of these datapoints are worrisome, but as we committed to Annie E. Casey Foundation, our data collection is not singularly focused on hotspots, but also serves to spotlight the areas where we are hitting the mark in what we have termed Community Brightspots which is included in each annual Data book.

The following are a few encouraging trends and spaces to watch (and perhaps invest in building capacity around):

1. Low maternal mortality rates;
2. The highest Breastfeeding rate in the nation and;
3. Government agencies like the Department of Sports Parks and Recreation offering robust recreational programming to Opportunity Youth

Overall, the most prescient datapoints which frame our programmatic priorities are the alarming decline in child population and the rapidly aging adult population. The implications of such a dramatic population shift present a real quandary for the future of the territory. Today, we highlight this datapoint for community stakeholders, and for policymakers, once again with recognition that if this trend persists in the VI, all the economic development strategies currently being deployed could be rendered obsolete. This is not an issue unique to the Virgin Islands. As geopolitical expert Peter Zehein states, countries such as Germany, and China are currently facing this type of demographic shift, where birth rates have been so low for so long that in just 15 years, there will not be enough consumers to drive their economy. What this means for us is that every new law we consider, every campaign or great vision that we develop must consider this graph, recognizing that the very makeup of our society could be very different in a future that most of us will live to see.



Each year, our Team mines through a mountain of data to determine which indicators and datapoints represent the most compelling information to highlight and likewise which does not. However, during this testimony, we seek to hone in on how our Team is activating the data; as well as offer some of the big, (some may say radical) policy ideas and considerations that we believe represent the kinds of innovations that the territory could employ in order to leap-frog the needle forward on child well-being. We offer these policy ideas with no ownership or agenda, but rather to simply begin planting seeds that could pave new pathways to more level and equitable supports and outcomes for our children. At the very least, we hope to spark conversations and a sense of optimism that we can do things differently.

It is also important to note as framing for these policy considerations, that AECF annually evaluates and quantifies policy ‘wins’ for each of their state and territorial Kids Count regions. Thus, we wish to provide policy and programmatic considerations that we believe *could* serve to address multiple crisis point and multiple priorities as we seek to explore holistic and intersectional strategies for tackling some of the most critical and deeply entrenched challenges facing our children:

1. The first policy consideration entails expansion of the territory’s free tuition criteria to include ex-pat Virgin Islanders whose children did not graduate from a local public high school, but attended public school in the USVI at any time throughout their academic career. With the recognition that many of our families with school age children continue to leave the territory due to the high cost of living or limited academic standards and options, this policy consideration could serve as an incentive to draw young Virgin Islanders and their families back to the territory; and, coupled with reciprocity terms that require a designated number of years of service in the local government could concurrently ensure an educated employment pool of Virgin Islanders for all sectors of the workforce (public, private and civic).
2. As we struggle to address the complex issues surrounding youth violence, student engagement, and limited academic options for children and families, another interesting policy consideration was borne from a recent connection with an affiliate from the Public Montessori School System in Puerto Rico. With a commitment to expanding academic resources and learning opportunities for parents, public Montessori schools currently offer “practical and sensory activities that support the development of cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills as students learn to collaborate with peers, resolve conflicts constructively, and develop a sense of empathy and respect for others.” Currently, of 856 public schools in Puerto Rico, 60 of them offer various levels of Montessori education. The creation of an American Montessori Society-affiliated training center in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, has credentialed more than 500 teachers in over 50 public schools on the island.
References: [Public Montessori Education in Puerto Rico - MontessoriPublic](#); [AMS 2020 Living Legacy: Ana María García Blanco \(amshq.org\)](#)
3. Graduated Driver’s Licensure laws have been enacted in a number of states seeking to tie adolescent driver’s licenses to high school and secondary educational enrollment, apprenticeship/ training programming as well as gainful employment for teens (age 15 through adolescence). While the data is not conclusive surrounding the efficacy of such policies, we think consideration should be given to the exploration of such a policy as a possible strategy for incentivizing our youth to complete high school while deterring idling and social disengagement.

4. As we reported in our Testimony to the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services back in June, in a New York Times best-seller entitled, *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt addresses the epidemic of teen mental illness worldwide particularly in developed nations. Deemed one of the most important books of our time on this topic of youth mental health, Haidt shines a spotlight on Gen Z (those born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s), outlining several major shifts that impacted youth of this generation unlike any other, including: (1) The rise of social media; (2) and A decline in play-based childhood. Haidt offers some targeted yet radical legislated Policy recommendations including:
 - a. No smartphones before high school;
 - b. No social media before 16;
 - c. No phones in schools, and;
 - d. More free, independent play

Reference: John Haidt: The Anxious Generation: 'The Anxious Generation': 4 Norms to Adopt Now (substack.com)

Systems-Thinking & Collaboration Skill building

As we prepared this Testimony, one of the things that our Team was fully affirmed in expressing was that while we are a community replete with a myriad of challenges, the Virgin Islands, like most of our region, is also abundant with untapped assets. Our hope is that the work we are doing around Systems-thinking and Art of Hosting practice (i.e. the practice of Collaboration Skill-building) will yield more coherence in our support systems for children and families.

In fulfillment of SCF's commitment to activating the data and to facilitating spaces that cultivate the requisite relationships that will move us out of the silos that have made Change so intractable in the VI, on April 16-17, 2024, the Foundation and our Kids Count Team hosted our inaugural KC Summit, which convened over 60 stakeholders from government agencies, local nonprofits, and educational institutions. Focused on fostering collective action and collaboration, the summit engaged participants around one of SCF's key priorities for its KIDS COUNT stewardship- building community competency around systems-thinking, relationship-building, shared accountability, and collective action.

With over 15 government agency representatives from the Office of the Governor, the Senate, the Delegate to Congress' office, the executive branch, and nonprofit representatives from all three islands, the significance of the summit was underscored by insights from SCF's *2023 USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book*, highlighting demographic shifts, child poverty rates, and the educational impacts of natural disasters and COVID-19.

Our hope is to institutionalize the Summit as an annual (if not biannual) convening wherein key stakeholders continue to build competency around collaborative skill building while also developing progressive programmatic and policy recommendations.

In the spirit of building collaborative tools and digital best practices around data sharing, later this year our team will be launching an interactive data dashboard with select indicators from our published Kids Counts USVI book. This online resource will allow stakeholders, including legislators and members of the community, to freely view and interact with our data, and to download our charts and tables for use in their projects and grant applications. We will also release an updated data set with a focus on our Opportunity Youth and the effects of a resource gap on their community engagement. Moving forward, we will also be expanding our network of nonprofits by holding advocacy training workshops, policy summits, and training sessions for skill-building in collaboration in order to cultivate a more coherent support service network across the territory.

The Cost of KIDS COUNT USVI: 2023 BUDGET

KIDS COUNT USVI is currently the only comprehensive data repository in the territory on child wellbeing, making it an invaluable asset and tool for the U.S. Virgin Islands. It is used by nonprofits and local government agencies across the territory to secure targeted federal and philanthropic funding. In addition to the data, St. Croix Foundation is actively and intentionally convening stakeholders around the data, and providing new tools around systems thinking and what real collaboration takes and looks like, such as we did in our 2024 KIDS COUNT Summit. The bottom line is that, at this time, there is no way for the Foundation to fully quantify the return on investment for KIDS COUNT, but we do know that it helps to secure critical dollars for the VI, justifies new policy, drives successful programs, advocates for and nurtures stronger data practices, and brings awareness to our community about emerging issues and gaps that our children and families are facing. It is imperative that KIDS COUNT is sustained, and its scope expanded and deepened, in the USVI.

While the Annie E. Casey Foundation provides KIDS COUNT Grantees with a small annual grant to support data collection and yearly publications, our unique (and challenging) data landscape, combined with our vulnerabilities relative to climate, political status, and geographic isolation, requires that St. Croix Foundation employ more robust data collection strategies to report and activate useful and current data.

Moving forward, we seek funding from this body for KIDS COUNT to support the KIDS COUNT Team as they continue to build a user-friendly, online data map and interactive data dashboard to allow policymakers, nonprofits, and the community at large access to data to inform investments and programming. We will also be expanding and amplifying our work with our local KIDS COUNT USVI Network of nonprofits and government partners by holding advocacy training workshops, policy summits, and training sessions for skill-building in collaboration.

To date, St. Croix Foundation has assembled a dynamic, skilled team of experts to lead the KIDS COUNT initiative. All Virgin Islanders, all deeply committed to the advancement of the Virgin Islands, this entire body of work is conducted by St. Croix Foundation's KIDS COUNT Team: a data analyst and principal investigator, data researcher and designer, community liaison, and special projects coordinator.

Overall, our Kids Count work has been underwritten by a number of local and national funding partners including (Global Giving, First Bank VI, Tropical Shipping and CARES funding awarded through the Department of Education and the Office of the Governor). While Annie E. Casey Foundation provides an annual grant in the amount of \$60,000 for KIDS COUNT program administration, the total program cost exceeds \$200,000 annually. St. Croix Foundation has shouldered most of the costs associated with administering Kids Count and now respectfully request support from this body to underwrite the cost of this essential resource for the USVI. We have submitted a detailed budget outlining the cost of our Kids Count programming.

The VILLAGE

In closing, several years ago, one of our nonprofit colleagues shared with us an adage I had never heard before but left an indelible imprint on our consciousness and in turn on our work.

"The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth." That sentiment feels quite apropos for us here in the Virgin Islands. As we contend with a spectacular perfect storm of crises. In so many ways, we are speeding toward our demise as a society with lower birth rates, steady migration rates of families with young children, and exponentially high adolescent homicide rates as we have almost normalized the loss of young black lives to gun violence. On the opposite end of the spectrum_- we are witnessing a swiftly aging senior population. If there were ever a moment for us to STOP and PIVOT . . . this is the moment.

Our hope; our ultimate hope, is that a critical mass of stakeholders will commit to getting clear about what we care about. We concurrently need to begin building mastery around systems thinking. It's a real skill that will enable us to hold and design synergistic and synchronistic systems_- a concept a friend and colleague, Leon Caldwell calls "BRAIDED ALIGNMENT." We also have to ask ourselves some hard questions around whether we truly value connectivity and how to achieve meaningful connectivity as the meaning of the word has changed to accommodate a more digital, hyper-linked society.

On the flip side, we also believe we need to continue to remind ourselves how wonderful our community is and that wealth is not always displayed materially... We must find ways to remind ourselves of the Power and Purpose of The Village.