



How Are Our Children?
Making Connections between Data and Child Well-being in the USVI

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Introduction

Good day, Senator Fonseca, members of the 35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands and the COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS & HUMAN SERVICES.

My name is Lilli Cox, Director of Communications and Community Investments 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. Our testimony today centers around the experience of children, older youth, and their families with a particular emphasis on mental health, the necessity of current data, and how a systems-thinking approach can yield a more comprehensive and cohesive network of supports for our children - including sound policy.

For over 30 years, St. Croix Foundation has served the U.S. Virgin Islands as a place-based foundation, serving as a grantmaker, direct service provider, a community development civic leader, and a fiscal sponsor for over 250 grassroots nonprofits. In total, SCF has been a conduit of over \$44 million in investments into the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our initiatives - spanning economic development, community revitalization, and youth and educational programming - have earned SCF national and international recognition in almost every priority area. And because our work to nurture a robust civic nonprofit sector expands far beyond traditional grantmaking, our collaborative and rooted approach to community development, data collection, policy advocacy, and direct services has afforded SCF a deeply holistic "systems" perspective and a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data.

As the territory's KIDS COUNT steward since 2020, St. Croix Foundation is uniquely positioned to utilize current and historical data to paint a picture of the various ways in which our young people and families are faring, particularly in the wake of two Category 5 hurricanes and then a years-long global pandemic. The data is officially in. As reported in SCF's three KIDS COUNT USVI Data Books (2021-2023), there are so many crisis points surrounding

our children that it is difficult to measure the cumulative impact on their mental well-being (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-usvi/>).

For contextual framing, here are some data points that paint a broad picture of the state of our children in the USVI: the territory's child population has halved from 34,289 to 17,086 in just 20 years; only 4.2% of public high school 11th graders were proficient in math in the 2021-2022 school year, and we have witnessed a rise in the number of suicides among our young people in the past year that gives heavy weight to post hurricane data on mental health among our children. These data indicators and more compelled SCF's KIDS COUNT Team to issue a "Call to Action" in our most recent Kids Count USVI Data Book published in December 2023.

In fact, in a [2022 New York Times article](#), "It's Life or Death: The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens," one psychologist who was quoted, offered a stark warning: "It's life or death for these kids." We in the territory should be taking heed. While local data on mental health is extremely limited, data collected in 2018 through the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) provide some alarming insight regarding the health and well-being of USVI youth. Reported in St. Croix Foundation's 2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book (on page 38, <https://stxfoundation.info/2021KIDSCOUNTUSVIDataBook>), the most recent USVI YRB Survey collected data almost one year following Hurricanes Irma and Maria but two years before the onset of COVID-19 on mental health and substance use among school-age children in the USVI.

Conducted by the Caribbean Exploratory Research Center at the University of the Virgin Islands and contracted by the VI Department of Health, the YRBS sample consisted of all students in all public schools, enrolled in grades 7 through 12, in the two school districts of St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix during the 2017-2018 school year, making these young survey respondents approximately five years older today than when they were initially surveyed. The sample included students enrolled in four junior high schools, one middle school, one K-8 school, four senior high schools, one alternative education academy, and one technical education center.

Over 100 sampled public middle school students reported that they have attempted suicide. Across the 1,280 middle school students who completed the survey, 32.5% "felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities" (a symptom of clinical depression); 22.5% seriously thought about killing themselves; 14.3% reported they made a plan; and 8.5% actually tried to kill themselves.

Nearly 200 of sampled public high school students reported that they have attempted suicide. Across the 1,782 high school students who completed the survey, 35.5% "felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities" (a symptom of clinical depression). Even more alarming, 17% had seriously

considered attempting suicide, 13.6% had made a plan, and 10.3% had actually attempted suicide.

So, when we say it's life or death for our youth, we mean it, literally.

Nationally, suicide attempts by Black adolescents (particularly Black girls) rose 73% from 1991 to 2017 compared to an 18% rise among White adolescents.

The VI's local YRBS corroborates the gendered differences in mental health experiences, finding that female students were almost twice as likely as male students to report feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities (46.0% of female-identifying students versus 23.6% of male-identifying students).

Over 800 female public high school students (nearly half of the sample) are reporting a primary symptom of depression. Decades of psychological research show that the rates of “internalizing problems” (such as depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and eating disorders) among adolescent girls are higher than the rates for boys, while the rates of “externalizing problems” (such as aggression, oppositional disorders, delinquency, and school problems) among adolescent boys exceed rates for girls.

Factors related to the rise in mental health issues noted in the 2022 *New York Times* article include the rise of social media, the decreasing average age of the onset of puberty, and trends indicating that teens these days are getting less sleep and exercise and spending less time in-person with friends. Not mentioned in the article were the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (referred to as ACEs), of which our youth have experienced many: from the 2017 hurricanes to the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention less-cited experiences of bullying, witnessing crimes, maltreatment, and other adverse events. Notably, increased depression among adolescents living in poverty was also not mentioned. As reported in the 2023 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book, *the territory's child poverty rate has risen from 29.6% in 2015 to 33% in 2020. And rates for children under age 5 are even more startling, at 37% territory-wide (42% on the island of St. Croix).*

Moreover, in a recently released New York Times best-seller entitled, *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt addresses the epidemic of teen mental illness in children 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). According to Haidt, three major shifts impacted youth of this generation unlike any other: (1) The rise of social media; (2) Overprotective parenting; and (3) A decline in play-based childhood. Haidt offers some targeted yet radical systems-level recommendations for addressing youth mental health including:

- Re-prioritizing play-time;
- Identifying more ways to embed children in safe, stable real-world communities, beyond online networks; and
- Delaying the introduction of smartphones and access to social media platforms, instead re-introducing basic flip-phones as first phones.

Our Children’s Story, Our Collective Story

Undoubtedly, of all the data we have the privilege of sharing, YRBS data is particularly special - *crucial* in fact - because it comes *directly* from our children. Like a blaring S.O.S. or an outstretched hand in a turbulent sea, through this data, it feels like our children were - and perhaps still are - begging us to toss them a life raft. Of course, while it’s no consolation, we remind our community that national trends suggest that we are not alone. Children across the nation are facing a collective and unprecedented mental health crisis: suicide rates among youth ages 10-24 in the U.S. increased by 57% between 2007 and 2018 according to a 2020 National Vital Statistics Report.

Beyond the individual experiences of difficult circumstances, it would behoove us to be mindful of the impact of stressors on a community level. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently released a report titled “Stress in America 2023: A Nation Recovering from Collective Trauma.” This report examines the lasting psychological impacts of the combination of era-defining crises including the pandemic, global conflict, racism and racial injustice, inflation, and climate-related disasters.

On St. Croix, recent focus groups hosted by St. Croix Foundation with partner Mercy Corps, Inc., brought together rank-and-file parents, business people, and clergy to discuss what the wider community - all adults – were experiencing. Subject to the same onslaught of trauma as our children (who also participated in a focus group), these adults expressed the lasting effects of multiple storms including the high cost of living in the USVI and the destruction of major infrastructure such as roads, schools, the hospital, and then COVID-19. The data points to the significant impact of collective trauma on well-being, evidenced by an increase in chronic illnesses and mental health challenges.

According to the APA,

“...psychological science has revealed that long-term stress creates risks for a variety of mental health challenges, may make us feel more sensitive even to daily hassles, can have broader impacts on our general life outlook and goals, and affects the body’s physiological response to stressors in ways that have notable implications for our physical health ... Stress puts the body on high alert and ongoing stress can accumulate, causing inflammation, wearing on the

immune system, and increasing the risk of a host of ailments, including digestive issues, heart disease, weight gain, and stroke.”

Like all other challenges before us, addressing the well-being of our children’s mental health will take more than just one program, one policy, or one nonprofit or public agency. It will require a systems approach, in which all members of our community - across the public, private, and civic sectors - collectively elect to do things differently.

More than the challenges, we at SCF and the KIDS COUNT Team often reflect on the tremendous *opportunities* presented to us given our small geographic areas and population size. We believe that with courage, ingenuity, and collaboration it is possible to make significant progress. To do so, we suggest taking a data-informed approach centered around results-based accountability.

Our recently hosted Kids Count USVI Summit represents St. Croix Foundation’s strategic agenda around Systems Building as we seek to elevate and lead a collaborative process of co-creating new, cohesive systems of support for our Territory’s children. This strategy will demand our collective acknowledgment that the current systems are simply not working and a willingness to build competency around new ways of “doing” and “being” which will lead to radical systems change. Additionally, it is essential that we commit to regularly collecting, disseminating, and utilizing current data in order to understand the true state of our children and families in real time. From there, we can establish coherent programmatic and policy agendas, while strategizing around systems change levers that will ultimately create a new ecosystem for our children.