



**Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks Legislative Testimony
October 31, 2025**

Good Morning, Senator Bolques, members of the Senate Committee, and esteemed colleagues. My name is Deanna James, and I am the President and CEO of the St. Croix Foundation for Community Development and I am here with certain members of my team from KIDS COUNT USVI - Dr. Saul Santiago, our Principal Data Analyst, Chermaine Hobson, our Sector Liaison, and Lilli Cox, the Vice-President of Communications at the Foundation. It is an honor to present our findings and insights into the current state of youth well-being in the Virgin Islands, and we thank you for the invitation.

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.

Today, we’re going to share some data collected as part of the Foundation’s KIDS COUNT USVI Initiative/stewardship that underscores why our whole community needs to come together—with up-to-date information—to tackle issues like youth mental health, violence, and public health and safety. While our community has a lot of strengths, the latest numbers around child welfare in the Territory highlight some tough challenges. These numbers reflect what our children are experiencing and provide a broader picture of our entire community’s well-being. Our aim is to inform, motivate, and spark conversation and collaboration so we can create a healthier and safer future for all our children.

The data speaks volumes. For example,

- In 2018, nearly half (46%) of USVI female public high school students reported feeling “so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks that they stopped doing some usual activities,” and more than one in five middle school students seriously considered suicide. These figures come from the USVI’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), conducted by the Caribbean Exploratory Research Center at the University of the Virgin Islands, contracted by the VI Department of Health.
- The child poverty rate was 33% in 2020, with 42% of children under age 5 living in poverty on St. Croix.
- The USVI saw an increase in the public school dropout rate at all high school grades in the 2023-2024 school year.

While our KIDS COUNT Data Books (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-usvi/>) report some hopeful trends, such as falling teen pregnancy rates and high breastfeeding rates—the reality of our children’s lived experiences is sobering. We see the evidence of this in our local newspapers’ headlines and hear their voices in the data: In 2023, the leading cause of death for young people in the territory ages 16-24 was homicide, with 61% of deaths in this age group attributed to murder. Nationally, homicide was the third leading cause of death for these youth (13.8%).

Our community’s most urgent need is to transform data into action. Since 2020, St. Croix Foundation has committed to ensuring that stakeholders have expanded access to share and utilize *current* data. To this end, our team has developed the territory’s first free, public KIDS COUNT USVI Data Dashboard (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-dashboard/>) —an online, real-time resource designed to empower policymakers, educators, parents and community organizations with actionable insights. By disaggregating data by age, district, and risk factors, this tool can guide targeted investments and programmatic strategies. Now armed with current data and the ability to quickly share data via our Dashboard, it was in 2023 that St. Croix Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Team issued a “Call to Action,” acknowledging that the territory must begin to activate the data by working together to change the outcomes for our children and families.

Of primary importance is addressing youth violence and mental health. To do so requires systemic, community-driven solutions. Earlier this year, the KIDS COUNT USVI team started an op-ed series addressing youth violence and its impact on our community. Recognizing that gun violence is a major concern for young people and the biggest threat to our children, we emphasized adopting a public health framework that encompasses primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention:

- **Primary Prevention:** Building strong foundations through expanding access to trauma-informed early childhood education, strengthening parenting programs, and creating safe community spaces—parks, sports leagues, arts initiatives—where youth can foster a sense of belonging. According to our 2023 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book, 40% of non-incarcerated youth who committed juvenile offenses

were residents of public housing, illustrating the need to address structural poverty and direct resources where they are needed most.

- **Secondary Prevention:** Reaching youth already at risk—those struggling academically, exposed to violence, or disconnected. Schools must incorporate behavioral health services that prioritize understanding trauma and early intervention. Mentorship programs, job training, and conflict-resolution workshops—like those offered by My Brother's Workshop and CHANT—are vital. Our recent data indicates increasing dropout rates, underscoring the urgency of targeted interventions.
- **Tertiary Prevention:** Supporting youth involved in violence through rehabilitative and healing efforts or restorative justice, trauma-informed therapy, and reentry programs that include education, employment, and housing. When we shift from punishment to healing, transformation becomes possible.

No single organization, agency, individual, or corporation can accomplish this alone. Truly transforming the lives of our children and families demands sustained funding, strong cross-sector coordination, and data-driven policies that are interconnected and based in a spirit of collaboration. Recognizing this need for collective action, St. Croix Foundation hosted its "2025 KIDS COUNT USVI and Nonprofit Consortium Alliance Summit: Harnessing Community Genius" this past year. Over three days, this summit convened 82 community stakeholders to co-design innovative, grassroots systems. The summit focused on systems thinking and skill-building in collaborative practices, seeking to empower grassroots stakeholders.

Additionally, St. Croix Foundation has just been awarded a grant through the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Children and Youth Policy Fund to map current legislative and administrative policies around quality childcare access and to work with local government partners to develop the necessary policy to *sustain and expand* support for our families.

To underline the critical importance of this work, the data once again provides evidence, which we reported to the Committee in 2024. The 2020 Census reveals our population is shrinking—the number of children under 18 has halved since 2000, from 34,289 to approximately 17,086—while the older adult population (over age 65) has surged from 8.4% to 21.3%. This demographic shift carries staggering implications for our educational, healthcare, and economic systems—infrastructure that is needed to support families. The stark truth is that if we do not take this data to heart and activate it via policy, funding, programming, and an overarching shift of consciousness that focuses on children and families, they will continue to migrate away from the islands. While we all know that our "children are our future" workforce, families are also the largest spenders. This demographic shift is not merely a statistic; it's a signal that our community's very foundation is at a crossroads. The decisions we make now will determine whether we can reverse this trend and secure a vibrant future.

In our August 2024 Testimony to this Committee, St. Croix Foundation offered several policy and programmatic considerations that we would like to reiterate, as we believe they could serve to address multiple crisis points and multiple priorities. These considerations

explore holistic and intersectional strategies for tackling some of the most critical and deeply entrenched challenges facing our children:

1. The first policy consideration entailed 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 continue to 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 our 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 regarding 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 2024, 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 legislative 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.

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

While these considerations may seem radical, they are simple levers that can have a significant impact on not just the data but our community mindset. And in truth, the Virgin Islands is well-poised to meet challenges and weather storms because *of our community's inherent wisdom and* collaborative assets—the warmth, resilience, and collective spirit of its people. Harnessing these assets through strategic collaboration, informed by real-time data and realistic, targeted policy, will enable us to build a safer, healthier future for all our children. Moving forward, sustained support, innovative initiatives, and unwavering community commitment are essential if we are to truly ensure every Virgin Islands child has the opportunity to thrive. The future of our Virgin Islands depends on our ability to recognize the urgency of this moment, embrace our collective power, and invest in the lives of our children and families.



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Supplement to St. Croix Foundation for Community Development KIDS COUNT USVI Testimony

The St. Croix Foundation and KIDS COUNT USVI team will use our online Data Dashboard as an analytical supplement to the testimony.

The Data Dashboard can be found here: <https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-dashboard/>.