



**U.S. Virgin Islands
2020 KIDS COUNT SNAPSHOT**

Building Level Pathways for Our Children

Welcome to Kids Count USVI!

A Message from the St. Croix Foundation Kids Count Team

In January 2020, St. Croix Foundation for Community Development (SCF) was tapped by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) to lead the KIDS COUNT initiative in the U.S. Virgin Islands. As we now open another chapter of KIDS COUNT for the Territory, SCF is framing a new agenda to tell a more coherent and cohesive story about how children in the Virgin Islands are faring in multiple and compelling ways. Central to our approach will be identifying ‘hot spots’ as well as ‘bright spots’ among targeted quantitative data indicators, while also presenting our findings in innovative ways that tell a nuanced story.

SCF’s strategy for Kids Count USVI is grounded in two central premises: one, that data is information that can and should provide insight; and two, while data is necessary, it is also insufficient without a focused emphasis on advocacy and civic engagement. Toward that end, our overarching goal is to actually *activate the data* to shift public policy and to move the needle on improving the lives of children and families in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Of course, to achieve this goal, every member of our community - every organization and agency that serves families – must begin to see themselves in the lives and stories of our children such that they feel empowered to work collaboratively to build safe, equitable and accessible pathways for their success.

Today, while the data surrounding our children has trended towards ‘crisis’, SCF’s Kids Count Team is optimistic about the future. As the smallest territory in AECF’s National Network, we believe the USVI’s size may be one of our greatest assets, affording us an unprecedented opportunity to make rapid and radical gains. We also believe that the Territory has the chance to craft a compelling case for the creation of a philanthropic (and federal) funding support system for our children. But, to do so, data must serve as the foundation of our ‘case for support’.

As reflected in the artwork chosen for this Snapshot, entitled *Ujima Journey*, Kids Count USVI is not just about data-- it’s about a journey of Collective Work and Responsibility to lift up equitable pathways for all of our children so that they may live happy, healthy, and *productive* lives. It’s about the prosperity—and the future of not only our children—but of our entire Village.

KIDS COUNT USVI TEAM

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About KIDS COUNT

KIDS COUNT™, is a national network of nonprofits, foundations, and consortia from all 50 United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1990, it is seen as a vital means of providing critical data about child well-being at the federal, state, and local level that will lead to advocacy, more-informed decision-making, and improved outcomes for children and their families.

For over 20 years, KIDS COUNT has been a valuable resource for the U.S. Virgin Islands, affording stakeholders a window into the lives of our children under the stewardship of the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI) in partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI). In the months and years ahead, KIDS COUNT USVI will seek to build off of CFVI's legacy by charting a course of targeted vigilance and sustained progress around the health and well-being of the Territory's most precious and vulnerable assets- our children!

Snapshots & Data Books

In this transitional year of Kids Count USVI, St. Croix Foundation has decided to be acutely intentional; to take the time needed to gain real understanding of the Territory's existing data systems. Instead of releasing a comprehensive Kids Count Data Book in 2020, we have opted to provide a *Data Snapshot* that will provide residents with a broad overview of the path forward for Kids Count USVI as we seek to build a sustained and deeply collaborative *movement* around our children and families.

Following this first publication, our first *Annual Kids Count Data Book*, containing 2020 data indicators, is scheduled to be released in the Summer of 2021 to coincide with Annie Casey's release of their *National Data Book*. In the longer term, SCF intends to create an Online Kids Count USVI Data Platform that will serve as a comprehensive repository of local data. We sincerely hope that every able-bodied resident will play a role in Kids Count, not just as stakeholders but also as "*shareholders*," adjoining in a collective vision of the success and prosperity of every young person in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In this Snapshot You Will Find:

- **An Overview** about Data Systems and the current capacity in the USVI to collect, retrieve, analyze and share correlative data about child well-being within and across agencies.
- **An Outline** of how SCF is collecting data, building relationships, and creating the infrastructure for future data-sharing and support.
- **A Contextual Abstract** of how children and families in the USVI are faring in the face of a series of successive crises including two category-five hurricanes and a global pandemic.

The primary utility of this *Snapshot* is to offer a general assessment of Data Systems in the Territory- systems which are necessary components of our collective capacity to prioritize, collect, and share data. It represents a foundational strategy for Kids Count USVI and seeks to elevate a Community-wide conversation about how we use and value data.

In preparation for the release of this Snapshot, St. Croix Foundation has been meeting with the Territory's key governmental agencies to share our vision and goals for Kids Count, to understand the data landscape of each department, and to develop data sharing agreements and working relationships with agency staff. We have also begun to collect information from Civic Partners who are capturing data (outside the confines of government) to assess the condition of our children and families in localized sub-districts across the Territory.

Where Are Our Children?

Understanding the Landscape

In March 2020 as COVID-19 developed into a once-in-a-century global pandemic just as SCF was preparing to launch our Kids Count USVI Initiative, we decided to pivot and to answer one fundamental question: **Where are our children right now?** Our inquiry was intended to first map where our children live and go to school in order to more accurately assess their vulnerabilities to this new threat. It was our objective to then overlay data on health, economics, and safety to support policymakers and civic agencies with directing attention and resources to where to needs were most urgent.

However, as the Kids Count Team began to delve into local data, we quickly discovered that there were a number of factors impeding the process of accessing reliable *and current* data on where our children are. We also noted that while existing data on the impacts of COVID-19 could help to outline a real-time story on the living conditions of our children, it was by no means sufficiently comprehensive to enable us to identify successful outliers or provide guideposts for how to direct resources to “hotspots”. And so, we begin at the ground level, seeking to understand the landscape of our Territory’s data systems.

The Backstory: Counting Our Children Amid Crises

Today, as St. Croix Foundation prepares to publish our 2020 Kids Count Snapshot in February 2021, the pandemic has claimed over 1.7 million lives worldwide^{vii}. Nationally, the death toll of the virus has exceeded 500,000 Americans^{viii} while in the U.S. Virgin Islands, 25 souls have been lost per our population of 95,668^{ix}.

Unquestionably, the COVID-19 Pandemic is an unparalleled crisis the likes of which few were prepared. But, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, crises have unfortunately been the norm over the past decade. In some ways, the extraordinary number of economic and natural disasters which impacted the Territory in recent years has sensitized the People in the Virgin Islands to their vulnerability to unforeseen crises while also rooting a unique brand of resilience.

Starting in 2012, with the closure of the HOVENSA Oil Refinery, (the largest private employer in the Territory), the USVI faced a steady decline in K-12 enrollment^x concurrent with skyrocketing unemployment rates which topped 17.8% on St. Croix in 2013^{xi}. Then, just as the USVI began to show signs of recovery in 2017, two back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes hit the islands. In the immediate aftermath, child enrollment in K-12 plunged from 17,286 to 14,566^{xii}. By the time COVID-19 emerged, children and families in the Territory were still rebounding from Hurricanes Irma and Maria- struggling with housing insecurity amid surging rental rates, as well as battered school and hospital systems.

2020 COVID-19 IMPACTS

The USVI unemployment rate rose from 4.9% in January 2020 to 13.5% by June 2020ⁱⁱ.

St. Thomas unemployment rose to a peak of 15.4%, while St. Croix peaked at 13.5%ⁱⁱⁱ.

100% of USVI Public Schools and most private schools transitioned to remote learning for the beginning of the 2020-2021 School Year^{iv}.

To mitigate for distance learning, VIDE has purchased over 10,000 devices for students and opened 3 new meal distribution sites^{vi}.

Where Did Our Children Go?

From 2016 to 2017 the number of children enrolled in K-12 dropped from 17,286 to 14,566, a decline of 15.73%.

All of these realities ultimately highlighted for our Kids Count Team the importance of accurate, comprehensive data to track our children in real time and, in turn, prompted our decision to lead a candid and urgent inquest into our local data systems in this first Kids Count USVI Snapshot.

Our Disconnected Youth

As St. Croix Foundation continues to deepen our leading inquiry into *where our children are*, what is quickly being revealed, through the process of collecting data from the major governmental agencies that serve and support children, is that our community must begin to direct keen attention on what our Kids Count Team has come to refer to as an “Invisible Population” of our youth. More commonly referred to as *Opportunity Youth* (aged 16 to 24)^{xiii}, we aim to identify data that will help us build a profile of *our* Invisible Population as we delve into the full spectrum of our children’s lives.

While we will continue to prioritize early childhood needs, we also seek to unpack what may be a pattern of disconnection that starts in early childhood and, without opportunity or intervention, may extend into adolescence in a debilitating cycle of detachment from family and community support systems. Our future Kids Count USVI agenda aims to commit focused study and data analysis on this group in recognition of the link the data may have to a persistent and chronic problem in the Territory: the incarceration and murder of young Black and Brown men. The overarching goal is to trace their developmental trajectories backwards.



Let's Talk About Data...

A Data Systems Overview

Data Currency, Advocacy, & Policy

As the Territory's new AECF Grantee, St. Croix Foundation has established strategic priorities for our Kids Count USVI Initiative, including reporting *timely* and *relevant* data. Annually, we will be analyzing a multitude of nationally aligned indicators *in varying priority* in order to assess child well-being relative to education, health, safety, economic security, housing, family supports and community resources. We have decided to add *climate change* as a new indicator which we believe has urgent and broad implications for families in small island states like ours. Data will be collected by gathering and analyzing standard metrics; by conducting surveys; and by hosting focus groups and community meetings to gain broad insight and perspective.

Ultimately, all the data compiled is intended to serve as a tool to inform decision-making and to build consensus around priorities, but it is not an end, in and of itself. The Data must be *used* to drive change-change that measurably improves the welfare of our children and their families. Of course, to do so will demand that our Community collectively activates the data by powering civic advocacy, by informing public policy and by deepening social impact investments.

DATA SYSTEM CHALLENGES IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

Data collection for comprehensive projects such as Kids Count USVI presupposes the existence of consistent and sophisticated data systems throughout various public and private agencies. It also presupposes that data can be efficiently disseminated to stakeholders upon request.

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.

The Virgin Island's 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 the reliance on paper-based records. All of these

obstacles have ultimately impacted and, in some cases, 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.

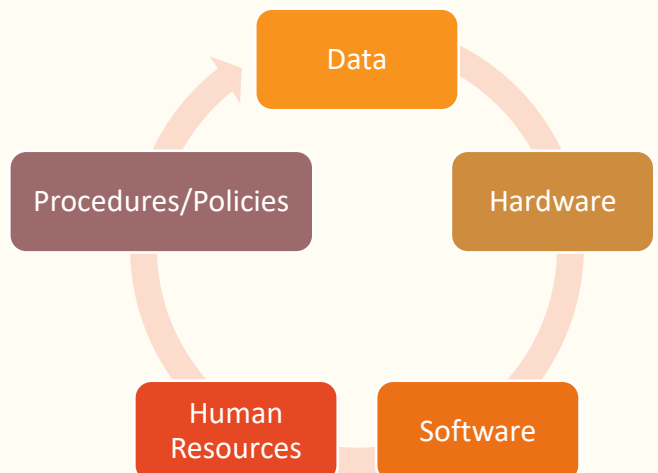


Figure 1: The interlocking components of healthy and robust data systems



Striving to assess the most pressing factors impacting our Territory's data systems, the Kids Count USVI Team has honed in on several issues which we believe represent both significant liabilities and opportunities for the USVI as we endeavor to develop sophisticated and fortified data systems.

THE POWER GRID

First and foremost, with only one public utility in the USVI, inconsistent electrical power delivery coupled with recurring power outages continues to represent an urgent vulnerability to local data systems due to the risk of compromised data hardware and interrupted service delivery. Several fundamental mitigations necessary to support and sustain a robust data system include redundant data storage apparatus that protect against data loss and provide alternate power generation to support the continuity of business operations during electrical service interruptions.

INTERNET CONNECTIVITY

Beyond power generation, the issue of internet connectivity presents yet another vulnerability in the Territory's Data systems. In fact, when Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2017, the storms caused significant damage to the Territory's infrastructure, connectivity, and continuity of internet service in many government agencies. Data systems were severely impacted, and some businesses that lacked cloud backup capability were susceptible to losing information permanently. While the USVI has a nascent fiber optic network under the purview of the VI Next Generation Network (VINGN), the unreliability of connectivity continues to present a material risk to data systems.

BUDGETS & HUMAN RESOURCES

Finally, for many agencies, tight budgets have led to the prioritization of standard service delivery and oftentimes not enough resources being earmarked to build, maintain and leverage data systems. As a result, the state of the Territory's data infrastructure has made the aggregation and effective dissemination of information either impossible or incredibly difficult. Additionally, while the collection of paper records has largely been converted to digital records in most (but not all government agencies), budgets have not always accounted for the requisite training and acquisition of specialized staff. For some larger agencies, technical staff and a data team commensurate to the scale of the Department's data collection needs is required to truly leverage the potential of the information that can be analyzed.

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON DATA COLLECTION



Not surprisingly, many governmental agencies throughout the Territory have experienced significant COVID-19 related interruptions to their daily operations, and as a result, to their data systems. Office closures have also impacted the ability of some agencies to respond to data requests in a timely manner. For agencies without a robust data system and remote access, this has resulted in a pause in the collection of data, loss of access to archived data, and an inability to analyze and share information.

For the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE), the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly challenging, forcing a freeze on many of the academic assessments used to measure student achievement. In fact, territory-wide assessments such as Smarter Balanced (English/Language Arts and Mathematics standards-aligned assessments), ACCESS 2.0 (for English Language Learners), MSAA (for students with severe disabilities), and LAP3 (for kindergarten students) were not administered in the 2019-2020 school year^{xiv}. This major service interruption has ultimately

created a gap in the VIDE's data record as it pertains to student academic progress. Fortunately, however, because the Department hosts one of the more advanced data systems in our local government, basic student demographical data, such as enrollment, attendance, and graduation rates continue to be collected throughout the pandemic.

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS VIRTUAL INFORMATION SYSTEM (VIVIS)

A possible bright spot in building real capacity around the USVI's data systems may be the Virgin Islands Virtual Information System Initiative (VIVIS) Territorial Longitudinal Data System (TLDS). Created via Senate Bill (No. 33-0189) in 2013 as a Governmental attempt at building a comprehensive, inter-agency data warehouse, VIVIS would provide breakthrough insights into the lifecycle of residents.

According to the legislation, VIVIS is intended to be an electronic vital records system that will serve as the primary identification information source for the Territory. Designed to assist government officials, community leaders and key stakeholders in making data driven decisions, it seeks to use predictive analytics to identify current and future trends to facilitate better decision making. VIVIS is also intended to serve as a collaborative venture adjoining government and private sector stakeholders around the collection of relevant childhood, educational and workforce data on the Territory's population. While the bill was passed and \$2.6 million in federal funding was allocated from the Institute of Education Sciences^{xv}, VIVIS is still in the developmental process.

Our Village

Building a USVI Kids Count Network

Outreach and Community Engagement

As a community-based operating foundation, SCF recognizes the inextricable linkages between our nonprofits and public sector partners. As such, a significant priority for our future Kids Count work will be around supporting and expanding a Territorial Network of partnerships and support systems across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in order to harness our Community's collective power around data.

At the same time that our Kids Count Team is working to collect data from governmental agencies, we are also reaching out to nonprofit and community-based organizations that are providing crucial and oftentimes backbone support for children and families across the Territory. To date, we are deeply encouraged by the partnerships that are being forged among government and civic agencies that have committed to working collaboratively with us.

In reality, when we first asked the question, *where are our children*, we knew that the Territory's nonprofit organizations (NPO) had many of the answers. With hundreds of registered civic organizations and grassroots efforts providing essential social services to local families, our NPOs and Community thought-leaders are undeniably critical to understanding the full station and trajectory of our children's lives. They are also providing sustained pathways to improving our children's overall well-being. In the preliminary research, rich NPO data is helping to shed some light on exactly *where, who* and *how* our children are faring.

Moving forward, as the U.S. Virgin Islands continues to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, while still navigating a protracted hurricane recovery, our Kids Count USVI Team believes the Territory can seize the opportunity of this space in time to address the inequities that persist in the lives of children and families. Because, ultimately, ***If Kids Count, then all Children must Count***, and each one of them must be given equitable and just opportunities to succeed in all aspects of life.



Acknowledgments

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To date, the following organizations have contributed to laying the groundwork for KIDS COUNT USVI:

Caribbean Center for Boys and Girls
Community Action Now
Family Resource Center
Giffit Hill School
Love City Strong
Men's Coalition of St. Croix
My Brothers Workshop
Society340
St. John Community Foundation
University of the Virgin Islands
World Ocean School
Women's Coalition of St. Croix

V.I. Bureau of Economic Research
V.I. Department of Education
V.I. Department of Health
V.I. Department of Human Services
V.I. Department of Justice
V.I. Department of Labor
V.I. Housing Authority
V.I. Law Enforcement Planning Commission
V.I. Police Department
V.I. Workforce Development Board
V.I.N.G.N. (Virgin Islands Next Generation Network)

About St. Croix Foundation

St. Croix Foundation for Community Development (SCF) was founded 30 years ago in the wake of Hurricane Hugo. Since our inception, the Foundation has been unflinchingly dedicated to the issues of equity and holistic, rooted community development. Committed to advancing a brand of progressive place-based philanthropy, for 3 decades, SCF has directed laser focus on catalyzing systemic change through a myriad of philanthropic strategies including strategic grantmaking, direct services, program administration and nonprofit capacity building. To date, SCF has been a conduit of over \$42 million invested into the U.S. Virgin Islands.



St. Croix Foundation
WWW.STXFOUNDATION.ORG

Endnotes & Resources

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2020 USVI KIDS COUNT SNAPSHOT



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