


# Op-Ed: Prevention Over Punishment: A Public Health Approach to Youth Violence in the USVI

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Gun violence continues to be the leading cause of death among boys and young men in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It is a heartbreaking and urgent issue that touches nearly every family, school, and community. But to truly make a difference, we need to stop treating youth violence like an isolated “crime problem” and instead start addressing it for what it really is: a public health crisis.

According to the [KIDS COUNT USVI Op-ED: The Biggest Threat to Our Youth? Gun Violence](#), 61% of all deaths among youth ages 16 to 24 in the USVI in 2023 were homicides. This rate is far above the national average. While other U.S. communities are also grappling with youth violence, our small islands are facing a particularly severe and deadly crisis. And this crisis does not begin with a gun in someone’s hand. It begins much earlier — with missed opportunities, broken systems, and untreated trauma.

## The Root of the Problem

Many children in the USVI start off behind due to developmental and educational gaps, which have been highlighted in a number of our KIDS COUNT databooks and in our public, online [KIDS COUNT USVI Data Dashboard](#). Because the territory does not have a universal, public early childhood education program, those children in lower-quality care environments may enter kindergarten already behind their peers. Without targeted support, those gaps widen year after year. By high school, many students are struggling academically and emotionally, with some choosing to drop out (for the past five years, an average of 143 students have dropped out of high school per year).

These young people, disconnected from school and often without access to steady work or support, become part of a group known as Opportunity Youth — those ages 16 to 24 who are not in school and not working. There are Bright Spots, too, which include incremental improvements for this age group in some domains. In 2023, for example, over 950 young people were reached through summer jobs and internship programs run by the Virgin Islands

Department of Labor. Another 89 received mentoring, counseling, and paid job training through My Brother's Workshop, a local nonprofit. These efforts matter, AND they only scratch the surface of what's needed.

## **What a Public Health Approach Looks Like**

If we really want to reduce youth violence, we need to look at it the way public health professionals look at other community-wide problems, like infectious disease or drug addiction. That means asking not just what happened, but why did it happen — and how can we prevent it?

Youth violence doesn't just "happen." It follows patterns; it reflects underlying emotional distress and unmet needs; and it is deeply influenced by things like poverty, family instability, neighborhood disinvestment, and a lack of mental health support.

In response, a public health framework offers a proactive, multi-level approach that focuses on prevention, early intervention, and systemic change.

Primary Prevention focuses on stopping violence before it starts. That means investing in early childhood education, supporting families, creating safe community spaces, and addressing poverty and inequality.

Secondary Prevention targets youth who are at risk of becoming involved in violence. Programs like mentoring, job training, conflict resolution, and school-based behavioral health support can help steer them in a different direction.

Tertiary Prevention helps those who have already been involved in violence to heal and build new lives. That might include restorative justice programs, trauma-informed therapy, and reentry support for those leaving juvenile detention or prison.

This is not about making excuses for violent behavior — it's about understanding the conditions that allow it to grow and doing something to change those conditions. Because if we don't, the cycle just repeats.

## **The Cost of Inaction**

Youth violence has real and lasting consequences — not just for those directly involved, but for all of us. The ripple effects strain hospitals and mental health providers, keep neighborhoods on edge, and contribute to business closures and family relocations. These disruptions also shrink the size and strength of our future workforce. In short, youth violence weakens the very fabric of our community.

We also can't ignore the emotional toll. Every young life lost is a tragedy, and every family grieving a son or brother is a reminder that we are failing to protect our most vulnerable.

## A Call to Action: Invest in Data and Data-driven Strategies

There are promising strategies to address youth violence, reducing crime rates and improving outcomes in communities that have made long-term, coordinated investments. We've seen glimpses of that potential here in the Virgin Islands, too — in small programs, isolated initiatives, and individual success stories. But to understand what will work here, at scale, and for the long term, we need something foundational: accurate, timely, and detailed data.

Public health crises require real-time information to drive effective solutions. Just as we wouldn't tackle an infectious disease outbreak without knowing where cases are rising and who's most at risk, we can't expect to reduce youth violence without a clear, data-informed understanding of the conditions that fuel it.

But even as we push for better coordination and smarter investments, we're still missing a crucial piece of the puzzle: comprehensive, reliable data about our most vulnerable youth. We lack regular, detailed reporting on when, where, and why violent incidents occur — and on which interventions are actually making a difference. We need more robust tracking of key indicators in areas such as: youth involvement in the justice system, rate of school suspensions and dropout, unmet mental health needs, and challenges to accessing support services. Without this kind of consistent, actionable information, we're operating in the dark — reacting after tragedy strikes instead of building systems that prevent it in the first place.

While different agencies collect information at various points in a young person's life, that data is often fragmented, outdated, or incomplete. Gaps persist—especially when it comes to understanding the mental health needs of youth, their involvement in the justice system, and the support services they are (or aren't) receiving. We often don't know enough about where (and with whom) these young people live, what risks they face, or what protective factors might already be in place.

As part of the [2024 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Spotlight](#), we took a bold step — not just to share what we do know about Opportunity Youth, but also to name the critical data that remains out of reach. We highlighted the missing indicators that, if collected and shared consistently — such as demographic breakdowns from police and court systems — could help us better understand who is most at risk, and when and where interventions are most needed.

Addressing youth violence as a public health crisis demands this level of clarity. Without it, we can't align resources, measure outcomes, or design solutions that respond to the real conditions our youth are facing. Filling these data gaps isn't just a research goal — it's a moral imperative.

— *St. Croix Foundation's KIDS COUNT USVI Team*

*Editor's Note: Opinion articles do not represent the views of the Virgin Islands Source newsroom and are the sole expressed opinion of the writer. Submissions can be made to [visource@gmail.com](mailto:visource@gmail.com).*