

Op-Ed: The Biggest Threat to Our Youth? Gun Violence

 stcroixsource.com/2025/03/25/op-ed-the-biggest-threat-to-our-youth-gun-violence/

March 25, 2025



In the United States mainland, the leading cause of death for young people aged 16-24 is something you might expect: accidents, primarily car accidents. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, however, the leading cause of death for young people is homicide. And, the comparison is not even close.

In 2023, there were 18 deaths of young people aged 16-24 in the USVI. Of these, 11 of the 18, or 61%, were homicides. Nationally, homicide was the third leading cause of death for these youth (13.8%) while unintentional injuries (including motor vehicle accidents) are the leading cause of death for individuals aged 16-24 across the United States (34.7% of deaths according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

While granular data is not available regarding the educational and employment status of young people involved in violent incidents, national data shows that Opportunity Youth, defined as individuals aged 16-24 who are neither in school nor employed, are more likely than other youth to be involved in crimes, including violent crimes (<https://stxfoundation.info/EconomicValueOP>). These young people face many barriers to education and employment, including systemic inequities, limited access to supportive networks, and challenges related to housing, health, and economic stability.

As evidenced by the regularity of heartbreaking headlines in our community, the growing epidemic of youth gun violence in the USVI is a crisis that demands immediate attention and action. And while St. Croix Foundation's KIDS COUNT Team is well aware that there are many formal and grassroots groups working to address the epidemic of youth violence and provide pathways to a better future for our Opportunity Youth, our community needs to collectively embrace these youths by implementing interconnected strategies that focus on employment, education, training, and counseling. Additionally, we can broaden our scope to include supporting the adults in their lives to more effectively care for and guide them.

Educational Programs

As published in St. Croix Foundation's KIDS COUNT USVI 2024 Data Spotlight (<https://stxfoundation.info/2024KidsCountUSVI>), the absence of a universal public pre-kindergarten early childhood program in the territory means that some students (especially

those from disadvantaged families) enter kindergarten developmentally and academically deficient. By high school, many already at-risk students have fallen so far behind that they decide to give up and drop out of school. These dropouts, now disconnected from the education system, are thrust into adulthood unprepared and unsupported, thus joining the ranks of Opportunity Youth.

Re-engaging Opportunity Youth in educational programs is vital. This can include GED preparation classes and access to vocational training. Flexible learning schedules and supportive environments can help these young individuals complete their education and gain the necessary qualifications to enter the workforce. The USVI KIDS COUNT Data Dashboard (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-dashboard/>), released in December of last year, showed an increase in the public school dropout rate at all high school grades in the 2023-2024 school year. Interventions aimed at at-risk students will be imperative to ensure that these students do not drop out and become disconnected from society.

Employment Opportunities

Creating job opportunities tailored to the skills and interests of Opportunity Youth is yet another crucial step in reducing violence. Local businesses, government agencies, and non-profits can collaborate to offer internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level positions that provide meaningful work experience and a sense of purpose. According to the KIDS COUNT USVI 2024 Data Spotlight, the USVI Department of Labor provided summer employment and internship programs for 963 opportunity youth in 2023. My Brother's Workshop, a nonprofit organization that provides mentoring, counseling, paid job training, education, and job placement for at-risk youth, had 89 youth enrolled in 2023. Given the urgent need, an increase in job training and employment programs like these is urgently needed.

Providing access to training programs that focus on skill development, such as coding boot camps, trade schools, and certification courses, can also equip opportunity youth with the tools they need to succeed in the USVI job market. These programs should be designed to be inclusive and accessible, ensuring that all youth have the chance to participate, even those without personal transportation.

Community-based Partnerships

The creation of programs specifically tailored to Opportunity Youth requires the collaboration of both public and private sectors. Community-based public/private partnerships can pool resources and expertise to develop initiatives that support Opportunity Youth. This can include funding for training programs, mentorship opportunities, and community-building activities that foster a sense of belonging and reduce deviation toward violent behavior.

Small communities like the USVI face unique challenges in addressing the needs of Opportunity Youth due to the limited number of resources dedicated to identifying and focusing on serving individuals in this group. However, these communities also have unique

strengths. The close-knit nature of smaller communities can foster more personalized and effective interventions with an increased effort and focus on data collection and sharing.

Engaging our entire community in efforts to support opportunity youth is crucial. Local leaders, family members, and community organizations can work together to create a supportive network that encourages positive behavior and deters violence. Our islands can leverage local resources, such as community centers, libraries, and sports facilities, to provide safe spaces for Opportunity Youth to gather, learn, and grow. These resources should be used to offer extracurricular activities, tutoring, and career counseling.

The epidemic of opportunity youth violence in the USVI is a pressing issue that requires a multifaceted approach. By focusing on employment, education, training, and counseling, and fostering community-based partnerships, we can create a more hopeful future for these young individuals. It is time for us to come together and address this crisis with the urgency and dedication it deserves.

To view the Kids Count USVI Data Book, click [here](#).

— *The St. Croix Foundation for Community Development has been in operation since 1990 and was founded in response to the devastation of Hurricane Hugo. Since their inception, they have been unflinchingly dedicated to holistic community development.*

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.