

Op-Ed: Strong Foundations, Safe Crossroads, Second Chances: Preventing Youth Violence in the Virgin Islands

stcroixsource.com/2025/10/29/op-ed-strong-foundations-safe-crossroads-second-chances-preventing-youth-violence-in-the-virgin-islands/

October 29, 2025



Too often, conversations about youth violence focus on punishment. We ask, *What did they do?* instead of *What happened to them—and what can we do to stop it from happening again?* But youth violence doesn't just "happen." It follows patterns. It reflects underlying emotional distress and unmet needs. And it's deeply influenced by poverty, family instability, under-resourced schools, community disinvestment, and a lack of accessible mental health care.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, where the effects of colonialism, natural disasters, and economic hardship intersect, the urgency of addressing youth violence cannot be overstated. Our young people are not disposable. They are navigating environments shaped by trauma and inequity—and too often, they're doing it without the supports they need.

In response, a public health framework offers a more effective way forward. It helps us move from reaction to prevention. It recognizes that safety isn't just the absence of violence—it's the presence of connection, stability, and opportunity. And it calls for coordinated action at three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.

Primary Prevention: Building Strong Foundations

Primary prevention is about stopping violence before it starts. In the Virgin Islands, that means investing in the early building blocks of well-being. We need to expand access to high-quality early childhood education across all islands, with trauma-informed support built in from the start. We need to strengthen parenting programs that support caregivers with resources, coaching, and connection—not judgment.

Safe community spaces also matter. Whether it's after-school programs, sports leagues, arts initiatives, or well-lit parks with trusted adults nearby, young people need places to belong. The more access they have to positive outlets and mentorship, the less likely they are to turn to violence. We also need to address structural poverty—because no amount of positive messaging can undo the stress of an empty fridge or an overcrowded, unstable home. As

reported in the **2023 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book**

(<https://stxfoundation.info/2023KIDSCOUNTUSVIDataBook>), 40% of non-incarcerated youth who committed a juvenile offense were residents of public housing.

Secondary Prevention: Reaching Youth at the Crossroads

Some youth are already at risk—struggling in school, exposed to violence, or disconnected from caring adults. For them, secondary prevention means creating off-ramps before harm occurs. These off-ramps have to exist in every space young people move through—classrooms, after-school programs, and community centers—so that support is accessible wherever risk shows up.

In schools, that means behavioral health services that prioritize understanding and early intervention over punishment, with more trained specialists in St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John who can recognize trauma and help students regulate before crises escalate. In the community, it means mentorship programs, job training, and conflict resolution workshops that give teenagers the tools to manage anger, navigate relationships, and imagine a future beyond violence. The free, online **KIDS COUNT USVI Data Dashboard** (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-dashboard/>) tracks enrollment programs from the VI Department of Labor, as well as enrollment for mentorship programs via My Brother's Workshop.

A young person who has these opportunities is less likely to pick up a weapon—and more likely to pick up a paycheck or a college application. But to make this real, we must fund such programs sustainably, not as short-term grants or pilot projects.

Tertiary Prevention: Healing and Rebuilding

For youth who have already been involved in violence—whether as victims, perpetrators, or both—we need to respond with healing, not just punishment.

Restorative justice programs, both in schools and in the community, can offer a way to repair harm and rebuild trust. Trauma-informed therapy must be available without long waitlists or stigma. And for those exiting juvenile detention or prison, reentry support should include education, employment, housing, and mental health services.

Too often, we expect young people to “do better” without giving them the tools to actually change. But the truth is, when we provide consistent support and second chances, transformation *is* possible.

The Path Forward

Addressing youth violence in the Virgin Islands isn't just a matter of criminal justice—it's a matter of community health. If we want long-term safety, we must be willing to invest in long-term healing. That means shifting our mindset from blame to belonging, from punishment to prevention.

To strengthen prevention at every level, we need tools that help us understand the root causes of youth vulnerability and measure where supports are most urgently needed. The St. Croix Foundation's *KIDS COUNT USVI Data Dashboard* is one such tool. Designed with accessibility and equity in mind, the dashboard brings together territory-wide and island-specific indicators related to juvenile justice involvement, foster care rates, youth disconnection, educational outcomes, and causes of death among young people aged 16 to 24. By disaggregating data by age, district, and risk status—including Persons In Need of Supervision (PINS)—the dashboard allows policymakers, nonprofit leaders, educators, and funders to target their interventions more strategically, identify geographic or demographic disparities, and evaluate trends over time. Within a public health framework, this data is invaluable: it enables primary prevention by showing where early childhood and family supports are lacking; supports secondary prevention by identifying risk factors like school disengagement or behavioral health crises; and informs tertiary prevention by highlighting systemic gaps in reentry or rehabilitation services. In short, the dashboard helps us move beyond anecdotes and assumptions, grounding our response to youth violence in real-time, actionable information.

Tools such as these can open the door to new opportunities. For example, the KIDS COUNT USVI Data Dashboard *Community Bright Spots* section tracks four years of enrollment data across a range of organizations. By reviewing these figures, community stakeholders can identify service gaps and co-design programming or even new organizations to meet needs—such as transportation, supplemental meals, and snacks—while also leveraging the charts and graphs to strengthen grant proposals. The dashboard will also be useful for monitoring enrollment trends moving forward, helping organizations to coordinate logistics across the public and nonprofit sectors more effectively.

It's not too late to build a future where every young person on our islands feels safe, seen, and supported. But we have to act—together, strategically, and with the urgency this crisis demands. We invite our community to join us at the launch of the *2025 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book in November*, where the numbers will inspire us to take informed, compassionate action—because understanding the root causes of youth violence is the first step toward building a safer, more supportive future for all our children.

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.