


Op-Ed: Harnessing Youth Genius: Building Systems of Support by Listening to Our Children

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St. Croix Foundation KIDS COUNT USVI Team

For too long, discussions about youth violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands have focused on the aftermath—the tragic headlines, finger-pointing for accountability, and calls for punishment. But what if, instead of just *reacting* to crises, we proactively built systems of support that are directly informed by those they are meant to serve: our young people?

Since March of 2025, St. Croix Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Team has published a series of op-eds. Our first, “[The Biggest Threat to Our Youth? Gun Violence](#),” was followed by “[Prevention Over Punishment: A Public Health Approach to Youth Violence in the USVI](#),” in which our KIDS COUNT team addressed youth violence as a public health approach—one that focuses on prevention, early intervention, and systemic change. Our third piece, “[Strong Foundations, Safe Crossroads, Second Chances: Preventing Youth Violence in the Virgin Islands](#),” outlined primary, secondary and tertiary approaches to prevention. And while these perspectives are grounded in theory, research, and practice, we also propose that any effective strategy must be co-created *with* young people, not just *for* them. We must recognize that our youth are experts in their lived experiences and take action based on the belief that their insights are invaluable in designing solutions that truly meet their needs.

In August of last year, St. Croix Foundation hosted its 2025 KIDS COUNT USVI & Nonprofit Consortium Alliance Summit, bringing together community leaders, activists, educators, providers, and *youth* from across the territory. The theme, “Harnessing Community Genius,” wasn’t just a catchy phrase; it was a call to action. A call to recognize that the innovative—yet often simple—solutions that our children and families require for the Virgin Islands to thrive lie within our community, including our youth.

What made this Summit uniquely different was our intentional inclusion of voices from those who have historically been excluded from important decision-making tables, including our young people. After the Summit, one youth responded in a survey that the Summit surprised

them by “My ability to say my ideas and perspective without feeling judged,” another requested more information about “implementing wellness awareness amongst the youth,” while others asked for more youth representation.

The Summit served as a catalyst for exploring “System Bypasses”—innovative new pathways around or through existing dysfunctional systems in the same way a heart bypass or roadway overpass creates alternative channels to override blockages in blood flow or traffic. The Puerto Rico Public School Montessori movement, which the KIDS COUNT Team has recently been introduced to, exemplifies a ‘System Bypass’ in action, where community-led efforts have transformed 60 public schools (7% of the territory’s total) by embedding Montessori teachers and methodologies within the public school system and improving academic and behavioral outcomes. This initiative demonstrates how grassroots innovation can overcome systemic challenges, making quality education accessible to low-income families and revitalizing schools facing closure. Imagine the possibilities if we empowered our young people (and their parents) to identify the barriers they face and to design their own “Bypasses”—solutions rooted in their realities (but more importantly, their dreams).

One tangible outcome of the Summit was the pitching of seven grassroots initiatives by “Community Hosts.” For example, a pilot wellness program ideated at the Summit was then launched at St. Croix Central High School in September, providing weekly yoga instruction to faculty, staff, and administrators to improve their mental and physical well-being. Another initiative, RISE VI, seeks to usher in a new season of consciousness—of bringing mindfulness to how we serve, interact, and support each other, recognizing that a true shift in mindset is not simply additive but *foundational* to collaboration. Both initiatives highlight an important truth: nothing in our community operates in a silo. Everything is connected. Meaningful change begins not only with programs or policies, but with the ways we host ourselves—our own awareness, habits, and choices. By starting within and recognizing our interdependence, grassroots leaders are modeling the deeper kind of transformation that allows authentic, collective solutions to take root.

And, for these solutions to be truly responsive, they must be grounded in local context. Since 2020, St. Croix Foundation’s USVI KIDS COUNT Team has sounded the call for more timely, nuanced, and meaningful data to better understand the root causes of youth violence. Recent numbers underscore the urgency: in 2023, 61% of all deaths among young people ages 16 to 24 in the Virgin Islands were homicides. In the 2023–24 school year, fewer than 3% of 8th graders demonstrated proficiency in Math, and 140 middle and high school students dropped out. Meanwhile, one in every three children across the territory lives in a family with income below the federal poverty line. These conditions are deeply interconnected—economic stress, educational disengagement, and community violence cannot be treated as silos.

At the same time, we must be clear: these figures only scratch the surface. Much of the data we need to guide prevention—such as real-time youth arrest trends, disaggregated data by island and community, longitudinal tracking of disconnected youth, and youth-centered measures of mental health and well-being—either doesn't exist, isn't consistently collected, or isn't publicly accessible. While numbers alone are never enough, even the numbers we *do* have are incomplete. That is why we must prioritize gathering not just more comprehensive statistics, but also the stories, perspectives, and ideas of our young people through mechanisms such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, focus groups, and youth advisory boards to ensure their voices are heard and valued. Our community must actively listen to and involve young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives. We must support youth-led initiatives and fund programs that empower them to be agents of change. By doing so, we can unlock their “community genius” and create truly effective systems of support.

It's not too late to build a future where every young person in the Virgin Islands feels safe, seen, heard, and supported, and we invite you to dive into the data through all of our KIDS COUNT USVI Data Products at <https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-usvi/>, including our Data Dashboard (<https://www.stxfoundation.org/kids-count-dashboard/>) and our 2025 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book. As St. Croix Foundation's KIDS COUNT Team continues to facilitate new spaces for youth voices to be heard, our 2025 Data Book intentionally incorporates opinions and ideas directly from young people in the community to encourage a fundamental shift in mindset—a willingness to listen, to learn, and to trust in the power of our youth to help us build a better future—together.

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