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## **Crisis in the USVI: Soaring Youth Violence, Educational Decline, and an Aging Population, According to Report**

**Staggering 95% of 7th graders not proficient in math, 22.7% rise in youth crimes, 50% decline in child population, and a median age of 45.9 years signify alarming trends**

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The St. Croix Foundation for Community Development recently unveiled the 2023 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book, titled “A CALL TO ACTION: Sounding the Alarm on Child Well-being in the U.S. Virgin Islands.” This pivotal report, presented during a virtual community stakeholder event on December 19, 2023, sheds light on crucial aspects of youth welfare across the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The KIDS COUNT© initiative, backed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), stands as a significant data repository in the United States, focusing on children and families. This network spans all 50 States, including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the USVI, offering vital data for various government agencies.

The 2023 report highlights several key areas concerning the youth of the USVI, addressing issues in family and community, education, health, and economic well-being. Specific attention is given to "Opportunity Youth," aged 16-24, who are neither in school nor employed. Notably, violent crimes in this group escalated from 198 incidents in 2021 to 243 in 2022, a 22.7 percent increase. However, youth employment and internship opportunities showed improvement, with enrollments in V.I. Department of Labor programs rising.

Disturbingly, 33 percent of children across the USVI live in poverty, with a higher rate of 42 percent for children under five in St. Croix. Despite these daunting statistics, the report also identifies several "bright spots" in the territory. Organizations like My Brothers Workshop, Caribbean Center for Boys and Girls of the VI, and Women's Coalition of St. Croix are making significant impacts. The Family Resource Center on St. Thomas notably served 379 minors in 2022, a marked increase from 2021.

The Data Book also reveals a significant decline in academic assessment scores post the 2019 hurricanes and Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, 95 percent of 7th graders were not proficient in Math, and 84 percent lacked proficiency in English Language Arts. Even so, the graduation rate for the 2021-2022 school year reached 74.4 percent, the highest since 2016-2017.

In health, the USVI reported a leading breastfeeding rate at 70.9% in 2021, contributing significantly during the national baby formula shortages of 2022. However, the territory faced a 39 percent increase in reported child maltreatment cases in 2022, a worrying trend after years of decline.

Dr. Saul Santiago, principal investigator and Data Analyst of KIDS COUNT USVI, emphasized the need for a collective response to these troubling trends to secure a better future for the territory's youth.

"The startling trends found in the extensive data sets of our USVI KIDS COUNT Data Books must serve as a call to action for all stakeholders to work together and ensure a brighter future for our territory," he said.

A critical concern highlighted is the aging population of the USVI. Since 2000, the number of children in the USVI has halved, as indicated by the 2020 Census. With the median age at 45.9 years, compared to the national median of 38.8 years, the USVI faces challenges in workforce development, healthcare, and education. The Data Book calls for a "systems-thinking" approach to foster cross-sector collaboration and data-driven policy-making.

Deanna James, president and CEO of St. Croix Foundation, posed challenging questions regarding the territory's commitment to its children. "Have we, as a territory, upheld our social contracts with children over the course of time? And, most importantly, as we face the reality that our community is growing older and our child population is evaporating, who are we building for? And, what if we were heading toward a future without children?" In the 2023 Data Book's Welcome Section," Ms. James said. Highlighting the urgency in the Data Book, Ms. James emphasized the need for deeper analysis and decisive action. The 2023 Data Book cover, featuring a child blowing a conch shell, symbolizes both an alarm and a call to order, she said.

