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Alarm Bells Ring as High Migration, Child Poverty, and Crime Threaten the Future of the U.S. Virgin Islands

With a third of children living in poverty and an aging population outpacing national averages, Virgin Islands lawmakers are faced with stark warnings of a society on the brink as migration and youth crime add to the growing concerns

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“If there were ever a moment for us to stop and pivot, this is the moment.” That was the warning from Deanna James, president of the St. Croix Foundation, who recently apprised lawmakers of findings from the 2023 Kids Count Data Book.?

“It feels like we are speeding toward our own demise as a society with lower birth rates, steady migration rates of families with young children, and exponentially high adolescent homicide

rates,” Ms. James pointedly remarked. These factors, alongside poverty statistics and troubling data related to learning success percentages, were presented to the 35th Legislature as “real drivers” for change.

“There are currently 5,576 children living in poverty. That's 33% of all children in the USVI,” noted Ms. James. A third of these children live in St. Croix. The Big Island also houses 42% of those children below age five who live below the poverty line. According to more troubling demographics, the territory’s population is aging – and shrinking. “Approximately 21% of residents are over 65 years of age, higher than the national average of 16%.” The number of children living in the territory has been halved in the last two decades, comparing figures from 2020 with those recorded in the 2000 census.?

Lawmakers were warned by Ms. James that the “shrinking population has vast implications for child care, as well as for our elderly population and overall family structures.” The 2017 hurricanes and the Covid-19 pandemic have contributed to net emigration and subsequently, a smaller population.

With fewer people residing in the territory on a permanent basis, lawmakers are being encouraged to make policy decisions with these realities in mind. The “alarming decline in child population and the rapidly aging adult population” presents what Ms. James referred to as “a real quandary for the future of the territory.” If this demographic trend continues, “all the economic development strategies currently being deployed could be rendered obsolete” as there will simply not be enough people on the islands to drive development.?

The St. Croix Foundation, stewards of Kids Count, have therefore suggested “radical policy ideas and considerations” that could stave off some of the emerging negative trends. Where growing the population is concerned, they recommend expanding the free tuition criteria to include “expat Virgin Islanders” whose children did not graduate from a local high school, but attended a school in the USVI “at any time throughout their academic career.” They’re confident this policy “could serve as an incentive to draw young Virgin Islanders and their families back to the territory.” It’s an option currently under consideration by Senator Samuel Carrion.?

The Foundation also proposed interventions to address declining math and English proficiency percentages. “Language arts proficiency [dropped] 7% and math proficiency [decreased by] almost 4% from pre-pandemic levels,” reported Ms. James. “Academic performance obviously ties to all of the external crises that communities like ours have faced.” These figures represent the largest decline since the Department of Education adopted the “more rigorous” Smarter Balanced Assessment system in 2016. VIDE, aware of student’s deficiencies, is reportedly working to increase funding for after-school programs and reviewing the reconfiguration of classes to ensure comprehensive learning.

Perhaps, said Ms. James, the USVI could adopt an approach that is growing momentum in Puerto Rico, where public Montessori schools are offering more students access to “practical and sensory activities that support... cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills.” Through collaborating with peers in a Montessori environment, students could “resolve conflicts constructively and develop a sense of empathy and respect for others.”

The St. Croix Foundation hopes these transferable skills will have knock-on effects where youth participation in crime is concerned. “VIPD reported 59 incidents involving youth ages 10 to 17 in 2022, a slight increase from 54 in 2021,” Ms. James shared. Most of the crimes committed by this demographic are classified as violent. Other youth, however, had a sharp reduction in criminal

activity, with Ms. James reporting “250 incidents committed by individuals aged 18 to 24 in 2022 compared to 2,008 in 2021.” These crimes were also “almost all” violent acts, including rape, homicide and aggravated assault.?

The data presents much for lawmakers to consider, with Senator Novelle Francis describing the detailed statistics as “more glaring than anything else I've ever had to encounter.” He was bewildered by poverty figures particularly when considering “the amount of money that's coming in here, post the hurricanes and the pandemic... I was challenged as to where that money went and who it benefited.” Similar sentiments were shared by Senator Franklin Johnson. “With all of the social programs that we have, I'm trying to figure out, how do we still have this poverty here?” he wondered.

Virgin Islanders continue to confront a geopolitical landscape that “places incredible burdens on families,” replied Ms. James. She did, however, suggest changing the way poverty is measured in the USVI, as national benchmarks do not factor into consideration the “incredible assets like our social networks [and] family units that provide incredible support in ways that national families don't have access to.”

While lawmakers and the St. Croix Foundation team work to identify ways to address these serious issues, Kids Count has highlighted “bright spots” that offer some redemption for the territory. They include “low maternal mortality rate, the highest breastfeeding rate in the nation...and robust recreational programming.”