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Data Hurdles Hamper Efforts to Improve Child Welfare in the Virgin Islands

St. Croix Foundation faces challenges in collecting and standardizing data for the annual Kids Count report, vital for crafting policies aimed at addressing poverty, education, and youth crime in the territory

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Data collection for the annual Kids Count report continues to present stubborn challenges for the St. Croix Foundation, officials told lawmakers on Friday. SCF President Deanna James told members of the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks that sourcing data, including poverty rates, statistics relating to education, and figures associated with youth involvement in crime, is “inarguably the most intractable challenge we've had to contend with.” The information collected is used to propose strategies and policies to better the welfare of young Virgin Islanders.

According to Ms. James, data from several sources is easier to access on the mainland through avenues like the American Community Survey, but such robust data collection is “not available locally.” The University of the Virgin Islands conducts the Virgin Islands Community Survey, but the most recent information from the survey was collected nearly a decade ago, in 2015.?

Consequently, reported Ms. James, “detailed current demographic data, including a count of children and poverty status, has not been available for publication of any of the three Kids Count Data Books.” Undeterred, the team at the St. Croix Foundation says they continue to “work directly with private and public sector agencies to gather information pertaining to children in the Virgin Islands.” That includes signing a memorandum of understanding with nine agencies to guarantee easier access to data banks.?

“One benefit of our direct data gathering approach is that it has created an opportunity to look for more nuanced indicators and produce compelling and community-centered data books with targeted data,” stated Ms. James.

However, despite efforts to break down barriers to accessing relevant data, the St. Croix Foundation is confronting another challenge: standardizing the collected data. “Different departments and agencies collect data in different ways, making it difficult to compare and analyze data across local government departments,” Ms. James told lawmakers. Within the same agency, data collection methods sometimes vary across the two districts, “making comparisons between our islands difficult.” The SCF president also lamented the apparent “lack of investment in personnel and training targeted toward data collection and analysis.”?

Reliable and accessible data is also stymied by “the lack of access to high-speed internet connectivity, scarcity of funds for technology and human resources, the instability of our power grid and an ongoing reliance on paper-based records,” Ms. James made known. Additionally, “geographic, economic and political factors have exacerbated the territory's ability to build and sustain comprehensive and robust data systems.”?

Nonetheless, the organization remains committed to its cause, telling lawmakers that “overcoming [obstacles] is imperative to powering all Kids Count partners' ability to convene around a collaborative, data-driven mission of supporting children.”

?With a team of only six individuals, the St. Croix Foundation continues to work assiduously to produce what Ms. James describes as “the only comprehensive data repository in the territory on child well-being.” Aware that the data presented in the report “helps to secure critical dollars for the Virgin Islands,” Ms. James has appealed to the Legislature for funding to continue their work. “I've been at the helm for 10 years and I have never sat before the Legislature requesting money,” she reminded lawmakers.

“The total cost exceeds \$200,000 annually. The St. Croix Foundation has shouldered most of the costs,” she noted. Additional funding, she says, will “support the Kids Count team as they continue to build more user-friendly, interactive data products for policymakers, nonprofits and the community.”