

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Opinion: It's Time for Us to Start Building Stronger Children

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In the wake of clusters of violence across the territory, public outcry peaks – we are shocked and saddened by “what has happened to our islands.” When the violence lulls, we turn our attention to more “pressing” matters ... until the next wave hits. Year after year, the cycle continues.

Indeed, a closer look at the statistics reported annually in the KIDS COUNT Data Book reveals that while our social systems are stretched thin trying to repair broken men and women (consider, for example, the state of emergency declared in mental health care), our children continue to suffer and the cycle carries on into the next generation. Several data points in particular illustrate the challenges facing our young people during the

course of childhood:

- *Children in Poverty*: Over the last 10 years of available data, the rate of child poverty has hovered around one-third. What's more, this calculation is based on the federal poverty level, which does not take into account the high cost of living in the Territory. It is likely that many more than 33% of children are living in financially unstable homes.
- *School Readiness*: On average, around half of public school kindergarteners are entering school with language scores below developmental expectation for their age.
- *3rd Grade Reading*: Over half of public school 3rd graders (65% in 2014 and 59% in 2015) are scoring at "Below Basic" levels.
- *Dropout/graduation*: In any given year, hundreds of students in our public junior high and high schools are lost to dropout (e.g., 114 public school 9th graders dropped out in the 2013-14 school year, or 7.2% of those enrolled).
- *Disconnected Youth*: Over the most recent 10 years of available data, the percent of youth ages 16–19 who are not in school and not working has ranged from 14% to 27%. There are literally hundreds of teens/young adults across the Territory who are "detached" from standard indicators of societal involvement.

Not surprisingly, these indicators are interconnected. A growing body of research indicates that early learning experiences are tied to later school achievement, emotional and social well-being, grade retention, and juvenile delinquency. The first five years form the foundation for later success in school and life; however, children do not all start off on the same footing. Chronic poverty and exposure to violence are two tremendous chronic stressors that impact a child's ability to thrive – as early as in the womb.

From inadequate prenatal care to lack of rich language home environments, young children living in poverty are more likely to experience health and social/emotional problems that interfere with learning and contribute to poor school readiness upon entrance to kindergarten. Living in highly threatening environments – such as in a high-crime neighborhood – children may adapt by becoming hyper-vigilant and hyper-reactive to perceived threats, and may become less able to control their own behavior. Others may turn to addictive behaviors/substances, demonstrate a greater vulnerability to mental illness, or see physiological manifestations in health problems and illness. Yet, we often neglect to take chronic stress and trauma into account when parenting, teaching, and interacting with the children in our community.

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men. -Frederick Douglass

Despite consensus around the critical importance of early childhood for outcomes throughout the lifespan, our youngest population group often lacks priority positioning vis a vis policy and program decision-making.

Building strong children means being proactive, and having the foresight to direct financial resources to those expenditures that will have social and economic payouts in the long-term. In order to improve long-term academic outcomes and well-being, increased attention must be paid to supporting and assessing school readiness and identifying successful, evidence-based programs to address the myriad factors that play

a role in ensuring a fair start for all children at school entrance.

Building strong children means changing the way we view the first five years of life, and capitalizing on the crucial developments that are taking place in children's brains during this period. They are literally being wired for the rest of their lives, and we are failing to capitalize on this critical opportunity period.

At the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI), we strive to use our collection of funds to enhance the educational, physical, social, cultural and environmental well-being of the children, youth, and families of the Virgin Islands. There is so much more to be done, and we are deeply committed to this work and to the community we serve.

In our capacity as the Territory's KIDS COUNT organization, we regularly convene stakeholders, serve on advisory committees, and contribute our expertise on individual and organizational scales. Each year we host community forums on St. Croix and St. Thomas to discuss the latest Data Book release and facilitate constructive dialogue regarding the well-being of children and families. Following CFVI on social media and joining our mailing list (visit www.cfvi.net) are the best ways to stay current regarding our activities and offerings.

Experts propose that violence should be regarded as an epidemic whereby the first step in eradication, like a disease, is to interrupt its transmission and break the cycle. If we are truly committed to ending the violence in our Territory, it's time for us to start building stronger children.

Submitted on Thursday by: Anna Wheatley Scarbriel, Ph.D., director, USVI KIDS COUNT, CFVI program advisor.