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Nearly 200 Public School Students Dropped Out in 2019-2020 School Year as Continuous Crises Stress the Education and Mental Health of Children

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The U.S. Virgin Islands since 2017 has suffered successive crises that continue to greatly impact the territory's youth, according to the [Kids Count USVI 2021 data book](#). The book is published by the St. Croix Foundation annually and gives a look into the state of the territory's children in key areas affecting their development.

Hurricanes Irma and Maria ravaged the USVI in 2017, which negatively impacted children. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic which started in March 2020 compounded the situation. According to the latest data book, which was released Wednesday evening at a virtual meeting organized by the St. Croix Foundation, during the 2019-2020 school year, 191 students in grades 7 through 12 dropped out of the public school system. During the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the

world went into lockdown, children in homes without internet access suffered the most.

Even so, the dropout numbers are similar to the prior school year's rate, when 161 students dropped out of the public school system.

Dropout rate per grade, beginning at the ninth grade:

- 9th grade: 51 students dropped out in the 2019-2020 school year, compared to 55 during the 2018-2019 SY
- 10th grade: 42 students dropped out in the 2019-2020 school year, compared to 45 during the 2018-2019 SY
- 11th grade: 50 students dropped out in the 2019-2020 school year, compared to 33 in the 2018-2019 SY
- 12th grade: 38 students dropped out in the 2019-2020 school year, compared to 31 in the 2018-2019 SY.

The data book showed a wide race divide, with black students representing 65 percent or 125 students who dropped out, followed by Hispanic students with 32 percent or 61 students, white students with 2 percent or 4 students, and other races representing 1 percent or 1 student. About 76 percent of the USVI population is black.

The graduation rate increased to 71 percent during the 2019-2020 school year compared to 62 percent in the prior years 2017-2018, and 2018-2019, according to the data book. Part of the reason for the increase was the lowered criteria for graduation, as the V.I. Dept. of Education took into consideration the toll of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There were 273 child maltreatment cases reported in 2020, down sharply from 420 in 2019, a year that saw a surge in those cases compared to prior years. According to the data book, in 2020 neglect accounted for 46.9 percent of child maltreatment, followed by physical abuse at 30.4 percent, and sexual abuse at 22.7 percent.

During the meeting, St. Croix Foundation President and CEO Deanna James spoke on the efforts of the foundation and other nonprofits in addressing mental health in children in the USVI. Part of an ongoing problem, which Ms. James has highlighted in prior Kids Count-focused meetings, is data collection. Adequate data collection would lead to the right policies being developed to address the issue, and those policies, she said, must be enforced to affect change.

According to the latest data book, in 2018 22.5 percent of surveyed USVI public middle schoolers seriously thought about killing themselves, while 14.3 percent reported that they had made a plan and 8.5 actually attempted suicide.

Poverty continues to be the greatest threat in child development, said the data book, as it "increases the likelihood that a child will be exposed to factors that can impair brain development and lead to poor academic, cognitive and health outcomes." It can also lead to "higher rates of risky health-related behaviors among adolescents."

According to the data book, the official poverty level in 2019 was \$25,926 annually for a family of two adults and two children.

"From the outset of this work, the Foundation has been affirmed in our belief that data is just the beginning. What our community does with the data is the real task before us," said Ms. James. "As the territory continues to navigate the Covid-19 pandemic, concurrent with a protracted hurricane recovery, our KIDS COUNT USVI Team believes that, collectively, community stakeholders can seize the opportunity to address the inequities that persist in the lives of children and families."

The Kids Count Data Book is an annual publication of the Annie E. Casey Foundation—at times in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Social Policy—reporting comparative statistics on child welfare in each of the 50 states of the United States of America.

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