

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mainland Data Indicating Children Mental Health Crisis Aligns With U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix Foundation Says

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The St. Croix Foundation has announced that recent national data indicates children in America are experiencing a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels according to the 2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring.

According to the foundation, while the U.S. Virgin Islands is not yet included in the National Data Book, the annual report focuses this year on youth mental health,

indicating that youth rates of mental health issues have increased through Covid-19 and concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. Surgeon General that conditions amount to a youth mental health pandemic. The National Data Book also sheds light on other challenges, including those surrounding health and the economy, that are affecting American children.

The report also indicates that children across America, and in more than 40 states and the District of Columbia, were more likely to experience anxiety or depression during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis than previously, with the national figure jumping 26%, from 9.4% of children ages 3-17 (5.8 million kids) to 11.8% (7.3 million) between 2016 and 2020, the year COVID-19 swept across the United States. This increase represents 1.5 million more children who are struggling to make it through the day.

In the 2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book published in December of 2021, St. Croix Foundation reported on data from the 2018 USVI Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which indicated that 22.5% of middle schoolers seriously considered suicide, and among high-school respondents, 35.5% “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks that they stopped doing some usual activities.”

St. Croix Foundation President Deanna James, the steward of the KIDS COUNT USVI Initiative, said, “As signs of anxiety and depression, this data, collected in the aftermath of Category Five Hurricanes Irma and Maria is an urgent call-to-action for our community to collaborate around robust systems and wrap-around programming to support our children as they navigate a rapidly changing and complex environment.”

Racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color, according to the release. Nine percent of high schoolers overall but 12% of Black students, 13% of students of two or more races, and 26% of American Indian or Native Alaskan high schoolers attempted suicide in the year previous to the most recent federal survey. Further, many LGBTQ young people are encountering challenges as they seek mental health support. Among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities, 6% attempted suicide; the share was 23% for gay, lesbian or bisexual students.

The release of the 2022 National KIDS COUNT Data Book underscores the need for the Virgin Islands to advocate for and develop a robust data infrastructure to ensure consistent and timely data collection instruments, such as USVI Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and the Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS), are administered. While the USVI does not have more current YRBS data to fully understand how Covid-19, compounded with protracted recovery from the hurricanes, has affected children in the territory, we know that after experiencing five years of disruptive crises impacting their home, school, and community life, as a predominantly Black community, trends suggest that many youth in the Territory may be struggling with behavioral and mental health challenges.

Current and consistent YRB data, for example, will provide a longitudinal view to fully understand how COVID-19 and recovery from the hurricanes are affecting children in the territory. The result is the Virgin Islands’ collective ability to identify targeted supports and interventions for the children, families and communities that are most in need.

The foundation said that as it works to strengthen the connectivity across vital systems in the public and nonprofit sectors, there is increasing awareness and commitment to sharing timely and accurate data that reflects in real-time how children in the U.S. Virgin Islands are faring and provides a collective vision and roadmap going into the future.

Each year, the KIDS COUNT National Data Book presents national and state data from 16 indicators in four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors — and ranks the states according to how children are faring overall. The data in this year's report are a mix of pre-pandemic and more recent figures and are the latest available.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls for lawmakers to heed the surgeon general's warning and respond by developing programs and policies to ease mental health burdens on children and their families. They urge policymakers to:

- Prioritize meeting children's basic needs. Youth who grow up in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers. Children need a solid foundation of nutritious food, stable housing and safe neighborhoods — and their families need financial stability — to foster positive mental health and wellness.
- Ensure every child has access to the mental health care they need, when and where they need it. Schools should increase the presence of social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals on staff and strive to meet the 250-to-1 ratio of students to counselors recommended by the American School Counselor Association, and they can work with local health care providers and local and state governments to make additional federal resources available and coordinate treatment. (Local data from VIDE indicate that public schools are near or within this recommended ratio, with a 247-to-1 ratio of students to guidance counselors in the St. Thomas/St. John District, and a 164-to-1 ratio in the St. Croix District.)
- Bolster mental health care that takes into account young people's experiences and identities. It should be trauma-informed — designed to promote a child's healing and emotional security — and culturally relevant to the child's life. It should be informed by the latest evidence and research and should be geared toward early intervention, which can be especially important in the absence of a formal diagnosis of mental illness.

St. Croix Foundation's USVI KIDS COUNT Team, publishes a local Data Book annually, with the next release expected in Fall 2022.