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USVI Shows High Rates of Maternal Breastfeeding Amidst National Child Care Crisis

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The 2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book has reported "inaccessible and unaffordable" child care in the United States. The annual report, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, presents a comprehensive analysis of the current state of child and family welfare, incorporating household data from all 50 states. However, the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) is not included in the national report due to a lack of territory-specific data in the American Community Survey.

To bridge this data gap, the KIDS COUNT USVI team publishes an annual territory-specific Data Book, aligning with the four key domains explored in the national report: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors.

According to the 2022 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of mothers who are breastfeeding under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The rate rose from 60% in 2020 to 72% in 2022, representing the highest breastfeeding rate across all WIC State agencies in Fiscal Year 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Despite this positive development, the report highlighted a significant child care gap, with 82% of children under the age of 5 in the USVI not attending affordable Pre-K nor enrolled in a licensed child care facility.

The 2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book also reveals that American families are struggling to secure child care that aligns with their work schedules and commutes, leading to adverse impacts on employment, particularly for women. The nation's average cost of center-based child care for a toddler in 2021 was \$10,600, posing a considerable financial burden to families. In the USVI, the median cost was slightly lower at \$6,000 annually, as per a 2022 survey by the USVI Department of Human Services.

Notably, these shortcomings of the child care system disproportionately affect women, single parents, parents in poverty, families of color, and immigrant families. The low wages for child care workers compound the issue. In 2022, the median national pay for child care workers was \$28,520 per year, while in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the mean annual wage was slightly lower at \$26,430.

The failings of the child care market have repercussions beyond families, costing the American economy an estimated \$122 billion a year in lost earnings, productivity, and tax revenue. An executive order issued by President Biden in April to expand access, lower costs, and raise wages is hoped to provide some relief, but the KIDS COUNT® Data Book calls for additional efforts. Recommendations include increased public investment in child care, improving the infrastructure for home-based child care, and expanding the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program.

The 2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book is available online at www.aecf.org/databook, and further information can be accessed via the KIDS COUNT Data Center at datacenter.aecf.org.