

Voices for VI Children, Judith Richardson, columnist
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Title: Birthweight is a vital indicator of infant survival and subsequent development

The tiny hands and tiny feet of a newborn baby – how sweet they are! But when they are too tiny there's cause for concern. Infants born weighing less than five and a half pounds are termed "low birthweight."

Low birthweight is a current major concern in the VI, and has been for many years. Weight at birth is an important indicator of an infant's ability to survive and thrive. Underweight babies face high threats, posing risks to their families and communities as well.

While fewer babies are being born here in the territory than in years past, the portion of babies born underweight has been climbing. The VI low birthweight rate is now almost 11% of all live births, up from 8% in 1997. In the US, the low birthweight rate is 8%.

Low birthweight is most often due to a lack of regular, pre-birth health care for the mother during pregnancy. Now as in years past, many women bearing babies are not receiving adequate, regular prenatal care. Mothers at highest risk are those without health insurance or support for a doctor's supervision and care during pregnancy -- most especially women who are young (age 24 or less), those who lack a high school education, and those living near or below the poverty level. Too many of our mothers fit these categories.

Why do the impacts of low-birthweight matter for newborns – and for their communities?

Nationally, three out of five infant deaths are caused by low birthweight, according to the National Public Health Service. Underweight babies who survive infancy have a greater probability of having developmental and learning delays. They are also more likely to have health setbacks and disabilities during their childhood and adolescence.

Underweight babies also face higher adult-onset health risks. These include heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, and osteoporosis in later life.

Families of low birthweight newborns are also highly affected. These babies' longer and more costly hospital stays, and the extra parental attention and time the babies may require can destabilize family financial and emotional resources – sometimes even limiting a mother's employment outside the home.

Low-birthweight also carries significant impacts for the community, which is likely to bear many of the financial -- and social -- costs for these babies' immediate and long-range care. In fact,

- Low birthweight babies account for more than half the costs incurred for all newborns.
- Babies most likely to be born underweight are those born to women lacking health insurance or regular prenatal health care (especially young mothers age 20 or less, mothers who did not complete their high school education, and mothers who are low-income or in poverty). These parents and their children are likely candidates for multiple layers of public services and expense.
- Babies born to these parents typically lack access to preventative health or high-quality learning services -- or to consistent, ongoing interventions able to best meet these children's developmental potential in infancy, childhood and beyond.

The results impact all of us. All of us in the community have a stake in our children's potential, future success, health and well-being.

Timely, regular prenatal care for a pregnant mother is the most effective strategy for prevention of low-birthweight for babies.

You're invited to learn more about how children and families are faring just now in the USVI – and even to lend your hand, your interest, or your time to help make improvements.

For more information on VI children's data see the most-recent USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book, posted online at www.cfvi.net (click on the KIDS COUNT icon at the bottom of the homepage), or call the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands at 774-6031, for an *Executive Summary* of the Data Book's contents.