

Voices for VI Children, Judith Richardson, columnist (*photo on-file*)
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Title: Infant survival rates are a sensitive indicator of a community's quality of life

We rejoice when a baby is born, and we wish the infant a long, healthy life. But it may be a surprise to realize that the risks to life are highest in an infant's first twelve months, from the day of birth -- until the baby's first-birthday celebration.

What causes a baby to falter and die during its first few months? The answers include the infant's health condition at birth, *and* the specific family and community conditions the baby arrives into. Today let's take a look at infant mortality, here in the US Virgin Islands. It may seem strange to interest ourselves in a sensitive topic that seems to affect such a small number of individuals, but infant mortality impacts the entire community.

The 2007 US Virgin Islands KIDS COUNT Data Book, "Our Children Matter," reports 9 infant deaths in the Territory during 2005 (or 5.5 infant deaths per thousand live VI births). It's with pleasure that I can attest that our Virgin Islands' rate is better (*i.e.* lower) than the U.S. national average rate of 6.8 infant deaths per thousand live births.

Why does infant mortality matter? Infant mortality is generally acknowledged to be a simple, sensitive barometer indicating key "quality of life" measures in a community. Infant mortality rates are considered to closely reflect:

- the community's safety
- the economic well-being of families within the community
- the emotional/physical health of mothers within the community
- family involvement and support by fathers within the community
- effectiveness of the community's healthcare system (especially the neonatal and infant care systems)
- adequacy and accessibility of the community's maternal and infant services

The rate of infant mortality is also significantly linked to a community's level of poverty. National studies indicate that the mortality rate for infants born to families in poverty is 50 percent higher than for infants born to families above the poverty level.

While we can take pride in our positive VI rate, we must also understand that adding just one or two more infant deaths a year can make our VI rate soar far above the national average, and keep it there. We have good neonatal medical staff in the Territory, and their work counteracts negative factors such as prevalent family poverty and lack of father support, locally. But we *can* make conditions for infants better. We can each resolve to lend a hand, our time, or even just our interest to help advocate for children and children's issues in the Territory.

To learn more about how children and families are faring just now in the US Virgin Islands, and about current risks to our children's healthy development, see the most-recent USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book (2007), posted online at www.cfvi.net (click on the KIDS COUNT icon at the bottom of the homepage). You can also call the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, at 774-6031, for an *Executive Summary* of the Data Book's contents.