

Voices for VI Children

Daily News, The Avis – July Op-Ed column, Judith Richardson, columnist (*photo on file*)

Title: ***Juvenile crime weakens community stability; youth success provides progress and prosperity***

What's going on with the amount of juvenile violent crime in our community? Again and again we've all been reading in the papers about violent offenses – crimes against people and property – that are committed our youth, juveniles who are age ten through seventeen years old.

Let's take a look at what's going on with this group alone. Though no one can cite the exact amount of violent acts committed by this age-group, because many acts of violence go unreported to authorities, let's look at a firmer statistic – the rate of arrests for criminal acts.

Our rates are alarmingly high. As reported in KIDS COUNT 2009, in the Virgin Islands our rate of arrests for juvenile violent crime is far higher than the national rate: 539 arrests per 100,000 youth ages 10-17 in the VI for homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, versus the national rate of 301 per 100,000 youth this age in the same period. Our arrest rate for juvenile property crime (ie. burglary, larceny, auto theft, arson, and destruction of property) is also high: 594 arrests per 100,000 youth age 10-17. The VI teen death rate (far too many from murder) is twice as high as the US rate: 123 per 100,000 teens age 15-19 in the VI, versus 64 per 100,000 teens the same age across the nation, for the same period.

While many juvenile crimes are committed by individuals who are not gang members, the rise of gang-like activity in the USVI constitutes a grave alert. Gang activity often starts in crowded settings such as housing projects or deteriorating neighborhoods, where stressors are high, and opportunities limited. Youth lacking attention or guidance from parents who may be single, unemployed or overworked, are drawn to the role-modeling, purpose, and protection that a neighborhood gang offers. New members help support the gang by hustling drugs, protecting turf, and raising money through personal or property crimes. Crime may lead to arrests, a record, possible weapons injuries or incarceration, and perhaps even death.

We all pay enormous costs when juveniles commit crimes. First there's the dollar cost for police response, legal follow-up, and court related fees. There's a grievous cost in loss of health or lives when shootings and other violence occurs. The community suffers two huge additional losses from high juvenile crime: a weakening of our islands' general safety and a sacrifice of these youthful citizens' path to productivity and success, which would have translated into greater day-to-day economic security and progress for all.

As a community, we must all own the problem and work toward solutions. To best utilize scarce public funds to improve community safety, we should invest in violence prevention: creating positive opportunities (and second-chances) for at-risk youth. We need to expand evidence-based programs and policies which have proven effective in reducing youth violence. These might include effective social work practices through our health and human service agencies (such as multi-systemic family therapy programs, and aggression replacement training). We need to strengthen our law enforcement response to youth crime. We also need to strengthen our delivery of early education to young children, effectively engaging them in learning, and fostering their skills towards achievement of success in school, and connecting them to workplace opportunities.

Juvenile crime costs all of us acutely. Juvenile success benefits all of us profoundly.