

**Voices for VI Children,**  
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***Title: Let's Keep Eyes Wide Open on VI Teenage Birthrate and its Impact***

For as long as anyone can remember, babies have been born to young, teenage mothers in the Virgin Islands. While this news may not raise anyone's eyebrows, some recent good news might cause surprise.

The just-released **USVI 2006 KIDS COUNT Data Book** reports that the teen birth rate in the US Virgin Islands has been decreasing slowly but steadily since 1997. The territory's teen birth rate reached a peak in that year: 61.1 births to teens ages 15 to 19 (per 1,000 teens in the same age group). During the most recent year for which data is available (2004), the birth rate lowered to 47.3 births to teens age 15-19, per thousand.

In simple human terms, this translates into 226 babies born in 2004 to teenage girls. These 226 babies represent 13.5% of the total live infants born to all VI women in 2004.

Who are these babies? They are the infant next door, murmuring in the back of church, or in the stroller you pass on the street. They may be your nephew, or your co-worker's child. They may be your own child.

What will these infants' lives hold? While every child's growing years are unique, statisticians tell us a lot about overall outcomes for these children and their teen moms.

Figures show that at least 80% of teenage mothers in the territory are unmarried, indicating that 180 or more of these new 226 babies are born to single teen mothers.

Despite the improving trend of the past years, teenage pregnancy and single parenthood continue to threaten the development of children -- and their teen mothers.

While pregnant, teen mothers are more likely to skip adequate prenatal care. Their babies are more likely to have low birth-weight and resulting behavior or learning delays.

Teenage mothers are likely to lack adequate skills or financial resources to care for their children. They are far less likely to complete their education, reducing the chance of accessing well-paying degree-based employment.

National data on early sexual relationships that result in births, stress the short duration of the relationships and the lack of financial and emotional involvement by the father in the new family's life.

Said simply, single, teen motherhood is significantly linked to child and family poverty. Decades of statistics show that children living without their biological father are two to three times more likely to grow up being poor. Local data shows that *over one third* (35.1%) of the child population in the USVI lives below the poverty threshold (defined nationally as yearly income of \$19,350 for a family of four).

How can we reach out to these 226 babies or others like them, and help to improve their outcomes? The **2006 USVI KIDS COUNT Data Report**, available by calling 774-6031, has some long-term answers -- some thoughtful, good news.

While we are making progress, there is still a long way to go.

The USA has the highest teen birthrate (41.7 births per thousand girls age 15-19) of all modern nations and over 50 developing countries. The USVI rate (47.3/thousand) is even higher.

As a responsible and responsive community, we must help our teenagers make informed, intelligent choices to postpone sexual activity and pregnancy until they are emotionally and financially able to give their babies a mature, healthy start.

To learn more about ways to help and to strengthen teens, visit [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org).