

Voices for VI Children

Daily News Column, Judith Richardson, columnist
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Title: It's a Good Time for a Gift of Knowledge about ALL VI Children and Families

Here's a New Year's present for the community. It's the USVI KIDS COUNT 2006 Data Book!

Why is this easy-to-read document – which gives insight on the territory's children and their families -- a wonderful New Year's present? Because for many years, concerned community members looking to provide all USVI children with safety, health, good values and a quality education, scrambled to find documentation that would help determine children's areas of greatest need, and solutions that really make a difference for VI children and their families.

Ten years ago, these questions were on the minds of the folks at The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI), a community organization established to strengthen outcomes for the territory's families and children. In the late 1990's, CFVI committed to publishing a definitive data report documenting key indicators of VI child well-being, and to looking at positive and negative trends over time. Now published yearly, the seventh annual *USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book* was released two weeks ago.

This book provides the community with a powerful tool to assess the conditions and needs of our children and families, including those at risk. The newest Data Book takes a special look at the extent of child poverty in the territory, and lingering impacts. The study also looks for solutions -- reporting on strategies culled from local discussions and community forums on how to break the ongoing cycle of child poverty in the USVI.

People have asked me why the *USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book* keeps calling attention to negative trends for children, when there are positive trends to report too (such as lower rates of infant mortality, and fewer births to teens). There are two reasons.

If we as a community don't publicly acknowledge the real-life challenges facing our children, we can't address the challenges accurately or effectively, and improve conditions for the next generation. The first goal of *USVI KIDS COUNT* is to increase public awareness of these challenges, especially for vulnerable families and at-risk children. As an immediate example, the new Data Book reports that more than one third (35%) of all USVI children are growing up in households with incomes below the federal poverty threshold. Poverty's long-lasting effects are discussed, as are poverty's pervasive impacts on the community.

Secondly, *USVI KIDS COUNT* aims to heighten public interest in strategies and policies which hold promise for meeting these challenges to our children.

The *USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book* has become an increasingly useful community resource and tool, focussing on new areas each year.

This newest 2006 report makes interesting reading... not too dry, with plenty of graphics to help illustrate how children in the VI are faring right now, and over time.

I encourage you to read it, and *use the information* to develop further community responses, solutions, and actions on behalf of the territory's children. If this community's children thrive, the future will be better for all of us.

The *USVI KIDS COUNT 2006 Data Book* is available online at www.cfvi.net, and free copies are available at The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (774-6031).