

**Voices for VI Children,**  
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***Title: A Look at the Economic Well-Being of Families in the USVI***

Anywhere in the world, a child's best bet for growing up with access to health, safety and opportunity is to live in a family that generates a stable, supportive income.

Would you like to know how children and families in the US Virgin Islands are doing, economically? The newest **KIDS COUNT USVI 2006 Report** provides a fascinating and often surprising snapshot. Let's take a look.

Based on figures from the annual *Virgin Islands Community Survey*, about 27,600 family households live in the Virgin Islands. More than three quarters of these are raising children. How many children (age 0 to 18) are we talking about? There are about 31,600 children in the USVI, representing 30% of the territory's total (adult and child) population of 111,459.

Last year's *VI Community Survey* figures show that the median income for VI family households is \$32,613. "Median income" means that half of all VI households have incomes above the median, and half have incomes below.

Through hard work, families usually expect their income to rise over time, and 98.5% of VI families report that they work and earn income. In the United States, median family income increased by \$3,000 in the last year measured, reaching \$55,327. But the median income of families in the Virgin Islands is declining: now \$32,613, it is less than in 2001 when families earned a median income of \$37,539.

Family income has been lost on all three islands. On St. John, income fell \$8,500 to \$41,143. On St. Thomas it fell to \$34,640. Family income on St. Croix fell to \$30,068.

Is **anyone** doing well? Yes, some are. Almost one-third of VI families (32.4%, or 8,804 families) earned \$50,000 or more (of these, 15.4% earned over \$75,000). But over half of Virgin Islands families (53% or 14,390 families) earned less than \$35,000. Nearly two out of every five families (39.2% or 10,634 families) earned less than \$25,000.

In fact, one in five VI families (20.3% or 5,512 families) lived on \$15,000 or less. A yearly income of \$15,000 equals about \$10 a day per person for a family of four (this falls 22% below the federal poverty threshold of \$19,157 for a family of four including two related children). Lastly, there were 418 VI families (or 1.5%) who earned no income.

Comparably, 10% of US families (15.5% of families with children) lived in poverty.

Median income for VI women is \$14,940; it is \$18,079 for men. Compared to men, women earn 83 cents on the dollar (or 83% of what men earn). Here in the VI, where almost half (47.5%) of all families with children are headed by single mothers, 70% of all poverty-level families with children are headed by single women.

While VI women earn lower wages, some causes of child and family poverty are also economy-related, with fewer jobs in the Virgin Islands paying a living wage, a decline of health insurance and worker benefits, rising medical costs, and a stagnant general economy. Other causes are program-related: these include insufficient public supports to low-wage VI families who are vulnerable to poverty, and a K-12 education providing inadequate preparation for well-compensated work in a 21<sup>st</sup> century marketplace.

These causes can all be addressed. Poverty does not have to be permanent. Other countries, through government policies that address economic opportunity and growth, have successfully improved their poverty rates. Many US states have adopted initiatives that specifically aim to reduce poverty in their state. We need to look at these, and learn from them what works. It's a good time to undertake a VI initiative to target poverty. Can we count on your interest? Can we count you in?