

**Voices for VI Children, October Editorial, columnist Judith Richardson**

**Title:** “A Territorial Challenge to Improve our Children’s Health”

National Child Health Day was October 2, and today is a good time to reflect on the findings on VI children’s health, from the most recent (2005) US Virgin Islands KIDS COUNT Data Report, *Our Children Now, Stepping Up to the Future*.

The Report provides information (from 2003, the most recent year that all data is available) on issues affecting VI children, from birth to eighteen. We’ll start by taking a look at babies born at low birth-weight in the territory. These represent approximately one out of every ten newborns (10.7% of all VI births), an increase of 32% since 1997 (when our rate was 8.1%).

Birth-weight is an important health measure for newborns because babies born weighing less than 5.5 pounds (2500 grams) are at high risk for developmental problems, both physical and cognitive (brain-related). Low birth-weight often results from a low level of prenatal care, especially among pregnant women without health insurance. Nearly a quarter (approximately 24%) of Virgin Islanders lack health insurance, according to the USVI Bureau of Labor Statistics.

When children lack health insurance, they’re less likely to get regular preventive health-checks, or the necessary care and prescription medicines for health problems. Uninsured children miss more school, and have fewer out-of-school activities. It’s estimated that 22.5% of all VI children under age five (approximately 1850 children) are uninsured. Of VI children age 5 to 17, an estimated 19.4% are uninsured (representing approximately 6,700 children under age 18).

While being underweight is a serious health concern for newborns, being overweight or obese is a serious health concern for children of any age, no matter how young. KIDS COUNT 2005 reports that among VI children age two to five years old, 23.2% of boys and 24.1% of girls were overweight or obese. (Weighing in at 85%-95% of the weight recommended for a child’s age in relation to his or her height is defined as “overweight;” weighing at above 95% is “obese.”)

Why are high numbers of overweight children a real concern? Overweight youth are vulnerable to long-term health problems. They are most likely to become obese adults, whose elevated risks include hypertension (high blood pressure), type II diabetes, heart and kidney disease, asthma, and cancer. Childhood overweight compounds these health risks, especially here in the Virgin Islands, where hypertension and type II diabetes are leading causes of death.

These are pretty dismal trends, but fortunately they can be reversed. By supporting pregnant women to obtain health insurance and seek prenatal care, we can lower the incidence of at-risk, fragile newborns, born at low-birth-weight. We know that less than 10% of child overweight and obesity is caused by genetics, or hormonal problems. Instead, sedentary activity (like TV viewing and videogame-playing), in combination with excessive intake of sweetened drinks and starchy or ‘convenience’ foods, are among the major factors contributing to children becoming overweight. More vigorous exercise and more eating of fresh fruits and vegetables (with entire families being involved) are ways to help prevent and reverse childhood obesity.

As we continue to reflect on Child Health Day, let us raise our voices in a territory-wide challenge to make health care and insurance affordable and available to families with children, to encourage pregnant women to seek prenatal care, and to promote healthy diets and regular exercise, not only for our children, but for entire families as well.