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homelessness.

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BODY:

The unseen victims behind statistics on adult drug abuse are children.

Theirs are the hidden faces behind the news reports of drug arrests and record cocaine seizures, behind the public policy debates on treatment versus punishment.

And in America there are hundreds of thousands of them.

They are youngsters like Ryan Carlson, 10, and his brother Kristofer, 8, whose mother shot cocaine into her veins for longer than her sons have been alive. Consequently, the two St. Paul boys endured an early childhood of uncertainty and neglect. Unkempt and underfed, they were shuffled from home to home until Kristofer eventually was admitted to a medical facility to be treated for homicidal and suicidal tendencies.

They are children like Deann Shorter, 12, and her siblings, Twoana, 10, James, 8, and Dashalla, 2, who have spent the last two years in St. Paul foster homes after being taken from their mother, an addict who neglected them so severely that she lost all parental rights.

They are like Terri, 12, a Maryland girl who watched in horror one night as her family wrestled a doped-up uncle to the floor to keep him from leaping through a window of their 20th-floor apartment in the belief that he could fly.

They are like twins Susan and Shonda, 13, whose father's drug use in Newark, N.J., transformed him into a violent,

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abusive husband. Eventually, their family was torn apart and their mother fled the state with her children.

They are adoptees Rene and Taralyn Ankrum, two California children who are among the nation's estimated 300,000 drug babies. Because of their mothers' prenatal drug use, they were born with neurological and psychological damage so severe that they face a possible lifetime of developmental disorders.

While the nation struggles to bring narcotics use under control, a legacy of adult drug abuse is being etched into the lives of the next generation -- children who will carry its scars even if they never smoke a joint, pop a pill or snort a line of cocaine.

Teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists and children themselves say that for many youngsters today, growing up in America means maneuvering through an obstacle course of drugs and drug-related activity.

"In one way or another, whether they are bystanders or active participants, rich or poor, black or white, whether they are urban, suburban or rural, children cannot escape being affected by the increased use of drugs in our society," said Nancy Peterson, spokeswoman for the Chicago-based National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse. "It's permeated about every facet of life. It's part of the fabric of our society these days."

Across the nation, those who deal with social trends paint a dismal picture of drugs' impact on the innocent:

-- Schools and welfare agencies must deal with growing numbers of children whose two-parent families have been shattered by drug use.

-- Overburdened foster care systems face an army of neglected and physically and sexually abused children, the majority of them victims of drug-using parents.

-- Children have become one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population, and officials say many belong to addicted parents who have been forced onto the street after spending their money on narcotics.

-- Thousands of children drift from guardian to guardian as they await the return of parents -- particularly mothers -- who are increasingly serving time in jails and prisons for drug-related offenses. For the past eight years, the number of women in prison has grown at a rate faster than that of men. Prison officials estimate that nearly 80% of those women are there for drug-related crimes and eight of every 10 have children.

-- Schools, teachers and administrators are wrestling with the question of how to educate a huge population of babies exposed to drugs while in the womb, whose diminished abilities foretell an uncertain future. They may represent as many as 10% of all American children born annually, according to the National Assn. for Perinatal Addiction Research and Education.

Even children whose lives are not directly affected by parental drug use cannot escape drugs' impact. In interviews across the country, hundreds of youngsters at elementary schools, intermediate schools and high schools were asked: "What are the worst things that you personally have seen drugs make people do?"

"I was in the car with someone on drugs and they got into an accident," said Deedee, 12, of St. Paul.

"I saw this guy come out of his house naked and six cops tried to hold him down and they couldn't," said Bert, 15, in Maryland.

"There was this guy who got high on drugs and tried to rob a store and got arrested," said Michael, 13, in Baton Rouge, La. "They do stupid stuff that they later regret."

"The person I know, he would always argue," said Kimberly, 11, of Minneapolis. "He would say he wasn't on drugs, but he'd go in the bathroom and take some."

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"My mother let this person who used drugs stay with us one time and they came in and robbed our house," said Andre, 16, of Los Angeles.

As students in an eighth-grade class in Laurel, Md., told their stories, Susan, 13, raised her hand. "I've seen it make people very violent and it tears families apart," she said.

How?

"Well, there was this family that lived near us when we lived in Newark, and the man used to do drugs," she said. "Most of the time the man was really violent. The wife would leave and take their children. You would be outside and he would throw things out of the window and be yelling and they would call the police."

When the bell rang, Susan lagged behind. Then, cautiously, she approached a reporter: "I want to talk to you," she said meekly. "You know that family I was talking about. That was my family."

Later, in a quiet corner of the library, Susan told her story:

"At first everything was all right. My mother was a nurse. She stayed at the same hospital for 10 years. We lived in a house. I had my own room. We had a back yard, a swing and everything. Now we live in an apartment and me and my sister share a room.

"Everything was all right until the drugs came in. My father used to do drugs . . . cocaine. He used to do it in the house and he and my mother used to fight all the time. The fighting was because of the drugs.

"I can remember the first grade. They used to fight in the middle of the night and they would wake us up and take us to my grandmother's house. My mother had a 1980 Cadillac. My father broke her windows five times . . .

"The fighting and stuff messed me up. In the fourth grade, I used to have temper tantrums. I was mad at everybody . . . In the sixth grade, my sister was getting into trouble at school all the time. . . . I would stay up late at night worrying about my mother, go to school and worry about my mother. . . . I didn't want to come home. I always wanted to stay at my grandmother's house.

"Then one day my mother came down here (to Maryland) to find us a place to stay. At first we stayed with her friend. Then we got our own apartment . . .

"I try to forget about it now. Those were hard times."

Susan and her sister, officials said, could have easily joined the thousands of cases that have flooded the offices of the nation's welfare system, a system "so overloaded by cocaine that it is about to short-circuit," says Rep. Thomas J. Downey (D-N.Y.).

According to a 1990 report by the House Ways and Means Committee, adult drug use has become the "dominant characteristic" in case loads of child protective service agencies in 22 states and the District of Columbia. It is the cause of dysfunctional families, child neglect and abuse in more than 70% of the cases in cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

"I would suspect that drugs or alcohol is at the bottom of probably eight of every 10 cases we get," said Brian Albiser, of Las Vegas, who oversees child protective services as administrative coordinator for the Clark County Juvenile Court.

The number of children placed in foster homes jumped 29% nationally in three years -- from 280,000 in 1986 to 360,000 in 1989 -- according to a report by the human resources subcommittee of the Ways and Means Committee.

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Jean Bridgeford, who is known to just about everybody as "Granny," has taken 235 foster children into her St. Paul home over the past 20 years. She needs only to look at the faces of the newest foster children scurrying around her six-bedroom house to know that adult drug use is driving children into foster homes.

"The kids we are getting now are mostly drug-related, and some kind of way sex is involved," she said.

"Before, we got the children because a mother had a nervous breakdown, or a kid wouldn't go to school. . . . Now, there are just some horrible things that are happening to our kids. . . . You'd be surprised at what they've seen."

Living with Bridgeford now are Christina, 8, who was sexually molested by her 12-year-old brother and whose mother actually introduced her older sister to cocaine three years ago; Tyrisha, 7, whose father's drug-induced stupor convinced him that it was OK for his daughter to watch him having sex, and Lisa, 17, whose mother's drug abuse led to a 10-year sentence in a Pennsylvania prison for bribery, forgery and prostitution.

In the afternoons, Granny watches over Tecara, 11, whose mother's habit landed mother and daughter in a nearby homeless shelter. Twoana and James Shorter, who have been with Granny for two years, make up the last of her permanent charges. Their older sister, Deanna, used to live with them, but was taken to a detention center for running away from foster homes. A younger sister is in another foster home.

Their mother, a cocaine addict, lives in a halfway house in Minneapolis. A St. Paul judge stripped her of parental rights after she failed repeatedly to live up to the requirements of her rehabilitation program.

Twoana and her siblings came to the notice of local officials by chance when they were living with their mother in an aunt's home. For two weeks, the youngest child, less than a year old, had been sick, running a fever and vomiting periodically.

One morning, Deanna, then 11, decided something had to be done, so she bundled the infant up and carried her four blocks to the nearest hospital. When she arrived, curious hospital officials inquired about her mother.

"She's at home," Deanna lied. "She's asleep on the sofa."

In fact, her mother had not returned home from the night before. That day, child welfare officials discovered that the children had been surviving largely on their own, clothing and feeding themselves, preparing for school and doing their best to tend to each other's needs while their mother fed her addiction.

The children were taken to a foster home where they lived for two months, before moving to "Granny" Bridgeford's.

"Living with Granny is OK," Twoana said. "Granny really takes care of me real good. She takes care of my hair, she lets me get curls in my hair and everything. I have people who like me here . . . Granny's got rules. I like that . . . That means everybody will be treated fair."

Even so, Twoana said, "I want to go back and live with my mom. I never gave up hope that I wouldn't go back and live with my mom."

Child welfare officials estimate that thousands of children like Twoana, neglected, often abused while living with their addicted parents, never get help because they do not come to the attention of authorities.

Vicki Carlson, who is in rehabilitation after 14 years of cocaine abuse, is still amazed that her children, Ryan and Kristofer, were never reported by their school teachers or her neighbors.

"It was pretty obvious that they weren't very well taken care of," said Vicki, who lives with her sons in a small St. Paul apartment made available to her by the local YWCA.

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"They've been through it all. I didn't care if the kids were around me or not. When you're an addict, that's all that counts. The drugs is your mother and father and your best friend."

Until three years ago, Ryan and Kristofer lived a near-nightmare existence, Vicki now admits. Because of her addiction, she says, they never had a stable home. During one two-year span, they lived in seven different locations, "and some of them were real dumps."

"I got kicked out of lots of places, for not paying the rent, or fighting or something," Vicki said.

The boys also ate poorly, "lots of cereal and stuff that I didn't have to spend time to cook," she said.

When Vicki left town, as she often did, on days-long excursions to buy drugs, she left the boys with "very irresponsible people."

"One time I went to Minneapolis to buy drugs and I left them with these guys who had just burned down their house to collect the insurance money. They wouldn't hit them, but they were pretty mean to them. They would do stuff like lock them in a closet. One time I left them with some people and Kristofer got hit by a car because they let him go out in the street."

Psychologically and developmentally, the children suffered. Ryan was failing miserably in school. Kristofer, then 4, was showing some disturbing behavior.

"He used to ask me to kill him," Vicki said. "He used to ask me to take the car and run over him . . ."

One time when Vicki overdosed, Ryan found her lying dazed on a sofa the next morning. He picked up the syringe. It squirted onto his shoe.

"I'm laying there in this fog and I remember he said, 'Oooo, Mom. Are you taking shots?' It was horrible. I shed lots of tears over those things in treatment. I would just beat myself up mentally for what I had done to my kids."

When Vicki began treatment three years ago, she sent her sons to live with their father. He sent them to his mother. Kristofer's persistent behavior problems required that he be sent to a facility for treatment. The three have been back together for a year.

Vicki believes that she is at last getting her life on track. She recently graduated from Brown Institute with an associate of arts degree in graphic arts. The boys seem happier and are doing much better in school.

She goes with them to counseling to help resolve the demons that arose out of her addiction.

"Sometimes Kristofer says things like 'I hate you' and 'I don't want to live with you any more.' The therapist says that's his way of saying 'you really dumped on me and I'm going to pay you back.'

"The suffering I see in Ryan is that something is going to happen to me, fear that his family is going to fall apart again. When his father sent Ryan to live with his grandmother and then Kristofer left, Ryan started (believing) 'nobody wants me. Nobody wants any of us. . . . I've lost my mother, my father and my brother.' "

During her years of addiction, Vicki often sold drugs to support her habit. She was never arrested. Luciana Johnson of Los Angeles was not so fortunate.

Late last year, Johnson, 28, was arrested for selling one rock of crack, less than a gram of cocaine, to an undercover police officer in front of her South-Central Los Angeles apartment. Johnson insists she didn't do it.

She says a woman buyer approached a known female drug dealer and asked her for drugs. The drug dealer left,

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re-emerged with crack and casually asked Johnson to pass it on to the woman. When Johnson did, she was arrested by an undercover police officer.

Johnson says she has never used drugs or sold them, but a Los Angeles jury did not believe her story. After her conviction, probation officers recommended that Johnson, who had no previous criminal record, be given probation. But on the day before Thanksgiving, a Superior Court judge sentenced her to four years in prison.

Sitting on a bench outside the courtroom were Johnson's four children, ages 3 to 14. They watched, crying and screaming, as their mother was led handcuffed to jail.

Johnson must serve two years before she is eligible for release. The children have moved from their four-bedroom home to live with their mother's widowed, 74-year-old father in his two-bedroom apartment, where they must share a single bedroom.

Sitting in a jail cell, tears streaming down her face, Johnson said: "They offered me a six-month deal and probation, which sounds pretty good now, but I didn't feel that I did anything. . . . The way they explained it in court, I guess I was guilty. But that shouldn't have taken four years of my life from my children."

Johnson represents an influx of women in prison.

According to the FBI, the number of women arrested for drug violations has jumped 176% in the past 10 years, from 51,125 in 1979 to 141,303 in 1989, while male drug arrests have increased 118%. Though women still make up a small share of total prison population, their numbers continue to increase dramatically.

More than 850,000 men and women accused of drug sales or possession passed through the nation's courtrooms last year. Thousands more were convicted of burglary, theft, robbery or prostitution that was drug-related.

In their wake are motherless or fatherless children.

Hundreds of thousands of children also will be caught up in drugs even before they are born.

At Denver General Hospital, Dr. Owen O'Mera, director of newborn services, said 8% to 10% of the children born there have been exposed to drugs -- most often cocaine -- while in the womb.

"It cuts across economic lines," O'Mera said. "We're seeing everything from the very indigent to the affluent."

At Washington, D.C., General Hospital, the number of drug-exposed babies runs at about 20%. Among the medical problems typical for such babies are low birth weight, high rate of sudden infant death syndrome, breathing disorders, neurological damage, high rates of AIDS infection, increased rates of syphilis and gonorrhea infection, blindness, deafness, mental retardation and hypertension.

As drug-exposed children grow older, they will be developmentally slow in speech and motor skills. They will have some degree of learning disorder and behavior problems.

"The neurological damage leads to behavior disorder," said Gretchen Buchenholz, executive director of the Assn. to Benefit Children and Variety House in New York City, which works with cocaine and crack-babies.

"One of the worst things we see is the diminished ability to come down from stimulation. Babies end up in the hospital with high blood pressure caused by simple stimulation, hugging, holding. . . . We're seeing baby after baby who you can't feed and hold at the same time."

Some drug-exposed babies are simply left at the hospital. Their mothers walk away or head back to jail, and no other family member can be found to care for the child.

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Two or three babies are left at Washington General every month, said Dr. Michael Young, assistant director of newborn services.

"Five years ago, it was maybe one or two a year," she said.

If the children are lucky, they end up being adopted, like Rene, 4, and Taralyn, 3, of the Ankrum family in Simi Valley, Calif. Rene was born addicted to heroin. Taralyn had cocaine and PCP in her system.

Both children have suffered from physical and developmental problems.

Rene had problems with speech, and later with motor skills. She didn't know how to reach out when she fell. She couldn't get up a flight of stairs or even sit on a stool.

Taralyn was born with chronic ear infections and is functioning at a speech level 16 months behind her age. She has had problems bonding with the family.

"She did not like to be hugged," Jo-Ann Ankrum said. "Today, you have to ask her for a kiss. She's not warm and receptive. She appears perfectly normal, but the wall seems to be always up for her."

Both children are quick to pick up diseases, Ankrum said, "which makes school a problem, because whatever is going around, they get it."

"The drug children are the hardest to deal with, because their problems are physical and neurological and medical and none of it is their fault," said Ankrum. "They start off a step behind. You're trying to help them compensate for something they had nothing to do with."

Times researcher Nina Green and the Times Editorial Library staff contributed to this story.

Child Abuse on the Rise

Drug use by adults is the leading cause of child abuse. The incidence of all types of child abuse has risen dramatically in the last decade, particularly in California.

Forms of Abuse:

Neglect: 55%

Physical abuse: 27%

Sexual abuse: 16%

Emotional maltreatment: 8%

Foster Care in California

Children who are placed in out-of-home or substitute care, including care in foster home, with relatives, or on probation but not institutionalized (per 1,000 children)

1987: 7.4

1988: 8.2

1989: 8.9

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1990: 10.2

1990 U.S. Average: 5.6

Source: Children Now

GRAPHIC: Photo, Adoptees Rene Ankrum, left, and sister, Taralyn, suffer physical and developmental problems because of mothers' prenatal drug use. ANNE CUSAK / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Innocent Victims: The unseen victims behind statistics on adult drug abuse are children. They are youngsters like 10-year-old Ryan Carlson, center, and his brother Kristofer, 8, whose mother Vicki, far left, shot cocaine into her veins for longer than her sons have been alive. Consequently, the two boys endured an early childhood of uncertainty and neglect. JUDY GRIESEDIECK / For The Times; Chart, Forms of Child Abuse, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Abuse Incident Rates, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Reported Cases of Child Abuse, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Foster Care in California, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times