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MURDER, SUICIDE, VIOLENT ACCIDENTS, DRUGS -- TODAY'S YOUNGSTERS FIND THEIR OWN
MORTALITY FRIGHTENINGLY REAL. DEATH IS NOW THE REAL-LIFE BOGYMAN.

SERIES: GROWING UP IN AMERICA: The Reality of Childhood Today. Second in a series. Next: Children and drug abuse.

BYLINE: By RON HARRIS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

DATELINE: LAUREL, Md.

BODY:

It was a routine exercise on a routine day at Mt. Rainier Elementary, an integrated Maryland school just outside Washington. One by one, third-graders marched to the front of the room to tell their classmates about their most memorable experience.

One pupil told of getting his first pet, one talked about the family vacation and another imaginative child described her own birth, as her mother had told her about it.

Then it was Marcia's turn.

"Well, one morning, I was sitting at the table eating breakfast with my sister," she began quietly. Suddenly, she dropped her head and became deathly still. Concerned, her teacher hurried over to her. After a brief pep talk, Marcia, 8, screwed up her courage and continued.

"Then," she said, "this man came in the house and stuck a gun next to my sister's head and said he was going to shoot her. Then he left."

With that, Marcia sat down.

Though few youngsters will have Marcia's experience, the fear she felt lives in the hearts and souls of many of the

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nation's children.

Death -- violent death -- has taken up residence in the psyche of America's youth. Today's youngsters find their own mortality, and the mortality of their friends, frighteningly real, according to psychiatrists, health professionals, teachers and the children themselves. Death is now the real-life bogymen, the horror movie that may at any moment come true.

Children growing up in America today are twice as likely as those in their parents' generation to be murdered before they reach the age of 18, and more than three times as likely to commit suicide, according to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

On the average day, six American children will be slain and about the same number will take their own lives, for totals of about 2,000 homicides and 2,400 suicides a year. Before the year is out, more than 3,500 will die in drug- and alcohol-related traffic crashes. Thousands more will come near death as they are beaten, stabbed, shot or fired upon, according to FBI statistics and law enforcement officials.

"The previous generation was less touched by death," said Tom Anderson, an instructor and youth counselor at University High School in West Los Angeles. "It was a rarity years ago that we would announce the death of a student. In the last three or four years, we've read quite a few of those announcements."

NCHS data shows that violent death arrives at the doorstep of America's youth largely irrespective of race and class. Traffic accidents are the most common cause of death for all youngsters. Among the races, black and Latino adolescents are most likely to be slain, often at the hands of another young person, NCHS statistics show. White youngsters have the highest incidence of suicide; they also make up half of the nation's youth homicides, according to the NCHS.

While some neighborhoods appear to be virtually immune from these problems, in interviews with hundreds of children and adults across the nation, one thing became painfully clear: Today's youngsters are hard pressed to escape the intrusion of violence and death, whether they live in the South Chicago neighborhood where, a recent study says, one child in four has actually seen a murder victim, or in tiny Sheridan, Ark. -- population 3,200 -- where three teen-agers committed suicide in separate, unrelated incidents last year in a matter of 24 hours.

Stop by a classroom in suburban America. Go to the violence torn, gang infested neighborhoods of urban America. Ask children whether they know of a friend, a classmate, a neighbor -- someone like themselves -- who was shot, stabbed or wounded or who took his or her own life. Watch the hands shoot up in the air. Even the instructors are surprised.

"I can't believe it," said a St. Paul, Minn., teacher as she looked in awe at the hands waving around her math class.

"I'm stunned," said a teacher at Maryland's Laurel High School as she surveyed the response.

Of 26 10th grade students in her class, 16 knew of a person under 19 who had been killed, 13 knew of someone who had been stabbed, four knew of a suicide and 11 knew of someone who had attempted suicide.

"Who were they," came the next question, "the ones who were killed?"

"A schoolmate," "my best friend," "my cousin," "a friend," "my neighbor," "a friend of my sister," "a friend of my brother," "my cousin."

Even in the nation's elementary schools, at an age normally associated with innocence, death is very real. In 1988, the latest year for which there are figures, homicide ranks fourth as the cause of death for children under age 14, and homicide is the leading cause of death by injury for those under age 1.

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At John Carroll Elementary School in suburban Landover, Md., seven of 31 students in one class knew of someone under 19 who had been murdered or died violently.

They recalled an 18-year-old who had been stabbed, a 17-year-old who had been shot, another 18-year-old shot, an 18-year-old who died of a drug overdose, a 13-year-old suicide, a 15-year-old strangled to death and an 8-year-old who had been raped and killed.

The accounts are even more sobering in the nation's tougher neighborhoods. Dr. Gary Ordog at Martin Luther King/Charles Drew Medical Center in South-Central Los Angeles searched the records and found that 34 children under 10 years old were treated at the facility for gunshot wounds between 1980 and 1987. Ordog did not find any such cases before 1980.

At Los Angeles' Washington Preparatory High School, where many students hail from neighborhoods where gangs and gunfire are a way of life, one-third of students in three randomly selected classes said they had either been shot, shot at or caught in gang gunfire.

Fred Bell, 17, was standing outside Centennial High School when a car drove by spewing bullets. He and his startled friends leaped behind a wall for cover.

"We could hear the shots hitting the brick wall," he recalled.

Matthew Bridgeman, 17, was shot in the hip when he and a friend ditched school and went to Jesse Owens Park one day.

"This guy was in a car and started shooting," he said. "I started running and they got up next to me and shot me."

Donald Jones, 17, was an eighth-grader when he was shot in the arm in a drive-by shooting as he and his two brothers stood outside a junior high school one summer.

Gwen Patterson, 15, narrowly escaped injury recently when she was caught in gang cross-fire while visiting a friend.

From Harlem to North Hollywood, psychiatrists, teachers and children say, today's youngsters know that they could face violence or death for saying the wrong thing or just being in the wrong place.

Gerri Lynn Mansfield DiMaio, national director of the delinquency prevention and intervention program for the Boys Clubs of America, has heard the fear in their voices as she has toured the country talking to young people, trying to design programs to eradicate violence.

"It's terrifying," she says. "Kids are growing up in fear of their life. Can you imagine what that would be to grow up like that? It's a horrible situation . . . it's cutting across racial, cultural and economic boundaries. It's moving to the suburbs, it's affecting the Mobile, Alabamas, it's affecting the Tuscaloosas. We worked with a Boys Club in the Midwest, in a very rural area where a youngster got shot close to the club."

Paul Bracey, a Massachusetts social worker who directed the state's anti-violence program until it was cut as a result of budget reductions, said many of today's youths carry a subtle, near-constant anxiety with them.

"Imagine a kid walking down the street," he said. "He sees a bunch of boys standing together or walking his way. He doesn't know them. These days, that's automatic fear. Now what does he do? Does he cross the street to avoid them, and does that bring more attention to himself? Does he keep walking? Does he speak to them? Does he not speak to them? Kids have to go through that every day. Most adults don't understand that."

In interviews, youngster after youngster expressed concern about being assaulted at parties, after school, while

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visiting friends or just while walking in their own neighborhoods. Many said that often there is no rhyme or reason for attacks.

"My father doesn't understand that sometimes you can't stop being in a fight," said Cameron Blaine, 15, a 10th-grader at Maryland's Laurel High. "People just want to fight 'cause they want to fight."

"I feel that you can be killed at any time," said his classmate, Andre Nelson, 15. "It doesn't matter what you do."

In high-crime neighborhoods, of course, the fear is even more prevalent. At Washington High in Los Angeles, every one of more than 100 students interviewed said he consciously fears being shot.

"When I leave for school in the morning and I'm standing on the bus stop, every time I see a car run down the street, I'm worried that I might get shot," said Roger Robinson, 16, who was once nearly hit in a drive-by shooting. "I'm looking in the car to see if they've got a gun, or who's in the car. You never know. It could come from anywhere."

"Last year," Sonya Hudson, 17, added, "I was coming out of baseball practice, and this guy in a Cadillac had this piece of chrome sticking out of his car. I was so scared I couldn't move. I was petrified. I don't even know if it was a gun. I wanted to run, but I was too scared."

"You're constantly watching your back," Aaron McKinney, 18, said. "It's not a war around here, but you never know what's going to happen next."

Around Washington High, some students avoid wearing certain clothes for fear they might bring attention of gang members, or expensive items that might provoke attacks. They avoid catching the bus on Normandie Avenue, which borders the school on the east, and instead walk three blocks to Western.

"Everybody knows that they don't have a lot of drive-by shootings on Western," said Mia Glenn, 17.

Even in suburban Maryland, students say violence and the threat of violence has caused them to watch where they go, to be wary even of friends and associates. In one class at Laurel High, 14 of 26 students said they had been to a party where someone had pulled a gun or a knife. In another, 14 of 31 said the same thing.

"It stops you from doing things," said Chris Scott, 16. "You automatically ask who is going to be at a party and if their parents are going to be there. You want to know if it's going to be safe."

"I'm scared to go out at night, even just around in my neighborhood," said Karen Messina, 15.

Dr. Carl Bell, a psychiatrist and executive director of the Community Mental Health Council in Chicago, said that such sentiments are typical. In extreme cases, young people have seen so much death and violence that they suffer emotional problems equivalent to the posttraumatic stress experienced by Vietnam veterans.

"You either think about staying alive or you do foolish things to prove you're invincible," said Bell, who conducted a study of 1,000 youngsters in Chicago's South Shore community.

"You have avoidance behavior. Kids don't go out unless there is somebody with them, or they don't go out at all. The kids become very withdrawn, very isolated, very detached. Kids join gangs because they don't want to be victims of the gangs.

"Then you have kids so close to death that they feel this need to beat death, to cheat death. They are extremely turned on, they have nightmares, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks of the violence or a combination of both. They feel this foreshortened sense of future. They start taking risks.

"It causes academic and behavior problems at school, in addition it also generates weapon-carrying behavior . . ."

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One of the reasons youngsters die is that more of them are packing weapons, say police, school security officers and school administrators. Fights that once resulted in cuts and bruises now end with stabbings and shootings.

"They carry guns," said Robert Rubel, a Milwaukee school principal for 15 years who is currently assistant director of the National Alliance for Safe Schools. "They have friends who carry guns and they have friends who have access to high-powered weaponry where that was almost unheard of 20 years ago."

Klaus Borneman, who teaches reading at a Bronx, N.Y., middle school, said that when he told a father that his son had brought a knife to school, the father pulled out a knife of his own.

"He said: 'I carry one. What's the big de'" Borneman recalled.

In a national survey of eighth- and 10th-graders by the Centers for Disease Control last year, 23% of the boys said they had carried a knife in the past year. Nearly one in 10 had carried one every day.

Weapons seizures among students across the nation are growing. In Miami, confiscations from students rose 30% from 1987 to 1988 and in New York City they increased 25%. Los Angeles weapons seizures in schools jumped 29% from September of 1988 to June of 1990. More than 800 weapons were confiscated in just five New York City schools in 1988 in metal detector searches.

And when children pack weapons, they use them, officials said. Los Angeles schools reported 1,076 weapons-related incidents in 1987 compared to 469 incidents in 1985. The number of incidents involving guns during that period more than tripled, from 75 to 255.

One of the most troubling and puzzling aspects of the increase in violent death among today's youth is their rapidly climbing suicide rate. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people.

Youngsters try to commit suicide at the rate of 25 attempts every hour, according to the American Assn. of Suicidology in Washington. Nearly all are actually cries for attention, help and love, but once every four hours an attempt succeeds.

According to separate surveys by the National Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and Boston University Medical School, between 14% and 20% of intermediate and high school students said they had attempted suicide. Experts estimate up to 250,000 youngsters tried to take their own lives last year.

Sometimes the warning signs are clear. At North Hollywood High School in Los Angeles, dean of students Casey Brown recalls a boy who came to school in a short-sleeved shirt, disclosing rows of self-inflicted slash marks up and down his arm.

"You could see this boy was crying out for help," Brown said. "I called his father -- and he said that his son was just going through something and he had to go through it like everybody else."

Sometimes there is no warning.

University High football coach Bob Ratcliffe and students at the school were shocked in 1989 when one of his players was found hanged in the back yard of his family's home.

"It was unbelievable," Ratcliffe said. "I had never gone through anything like that. He was really a good kid. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. He was a guy we had voted as having the best work ethic while on the football team. And then he was gone. It hit everybody here hard."

While psychiatrists and researchers know the scope of the problem, they have been hard-pressed to understand why the increase in suicides has been so dramatic.

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"There is no reason to think there is any greater incidence of depression from a biological cause, so we have to look for other reasons that are harder to pinpoint," said Dr. George Weiner, chairman of the department of psychiatry at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

"One of the most common reasons for a suicide attempt is a disappointment or frustration, particularly in a love affair," Weiner said. "But teen-age romances broke up 25 years ago (too). Is there something different about the sense of despair, the sense of hopelessness, the sense of anger that a romance is not going to continue that youngsters feel that suicide is a reasonable solution? Is there greater vulnerability? Is there a greater sense that life is no longer worth living because I can't have what I want?"

One contributor is clearly the link between drug use and suicide. According to a study published in the American Journal of Medicine, teen-agers on drugs are at least three times more likely to attempt suicide than drug-free adolescents.

In addition, "we know that there is some relationship between the quality of parenting and the suicides," Weiner said. "At the same time, there is more stress in today's world that children and adolescents have to deal with, and we know that children who make suicide attempts have higher levels of stress in their lives.

"The people who make attempts are not equipped to deal with the stress. The youngsters are not problem solving real clearly. That suggests that they haven't been trained to do that."

In the wake of the mounting numbers, what most disturbs those who deal with kids and violence is what they say is the public's seemingly cavalier attitude about it.

While parents are quick to spring into action to combat diseases that take children's lives, said Dr. Susan Sorenson, an epidemiologist at UCLA, little attention or federal funding has been devoted to trying to figure out a way to protect children from death at their own hands or the hands of others.

"Most people take the attitude that it's those other kids," she said. "It's the bad kids. They blame a lot of it on gangs and they say as long as I don't live in that kind of neighborhood then my kids are OK."

Another response, said Bracey, the Massachusetts social worker, is to simply blame children for acts of violence without taking into account a culture of violence that adults have created.

"We're blaming the children and focusing on all kinds of initiatives to lock them up, put them behind bars, kick them out of schools," he said. "The ones who are guilty -- the ones who are the real perpetrators -- are us.

"It's adults who put on the television programs that push sex and drugs, it's adults that put the violence on television, it's adults who show that a handgun is the best way to settle an argument. We ask what's wrong with them, yet we don't ask what's wrong with us when the only thing that entertains us is killing and sex."

GRAPHIC: Photo, A youngster in Evansville, Ind., peers into the coffin of a friend who was killed by gang gunfire. GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Two women comfort each other after learning of the suicides of four teen-age friends. Associated Press; Photo, Living With Death: Violent death has taken up residence in the psyche of America's youth. Youngsters find their own mortality much too real, with murder and suicide all around them, Column One reports. Above, Los Angeles paramedics carry in an 11-year-old boy with a shotgun wound to the head. At right is the boy's 18-year-old friend. LACY ATKINS / Los Angeles Times; Chart, Teen Suicide Deaths, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Teen Deaths by Homicide, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times