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Special Report: Death too young

Sacramento County has seen an alarming jump in youth suicides, raising the call for more help

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On Aug. 28, 2006, almost exactly two years after his dad was sent to prison, Ryan Lance Brown killed himself. He was 12.

His mom -- single and disabled -- is trying to keep it together. When discussing the morning of her son's death, she gestures wildly and laughs as she describes knocking on his door all excited about his first day of middle school. It's as if she's imagining the story ends with Ryan jumping out of bed to surprise her.

Sonji Brown's bravado doesn't last. Her voice falls to a whisper. Sitting in the south Sacramento home where Ryan lived and died, she starts to cry.

"Even when the paramedics came, I wanted them to be like, 'We almost lost him,'" she said.

The self-recrimination, the denial, the anger, the deep pain -- it all hangs over parents who have lost their sons and daughters to suicide. Their plight is largely invisible, but becoming far more common in Sacramento.

Suicide among those younger than 25 has jumped more than 60 percent in Sacramento County since the start of the decade, according to a Bee analysis of data from the California Center for Health Statistics and the Sacramento County Coroner's Office.

From 1999 to 2001, 49 children and young adults took their lives in Sacramento County. From 2004 to 2006, their numbers climbed to 80. Surrounding counties did not see a similar, consistent rise.

South Sacramento, along with Oak Park -- another of the county's poorest areas -- is driving the trend. Thirty-three children and young adults living in those neighborhoods killed themselves during the last four years, more than twice the total under-25 suicides in Folsom, Orangevale, Rancho Cordova, Fair Oaks, Carmichael and Citrus Heights -- which combined have about the same number of children and young adults.

Sixteen of those 33 were teenagers, coroner's reports show. Twelve hanged themselves. Two overdosed. Sixteen used a gun. Three jumped in front of a car or train. Five were African American, 12 Asian, 15 white and one was Latino. All but three were boys or young men.

Almost to a person, the parents blame themselves. They ruminate over signs they missed, avenues they didn't take.

"I'll never know," said Tim Sirmons, whose son Josh killed himself in south Sacramento at age 18, "if I had gotten to him sooner, would it have saved his life?"

While such doubt often is misplaced -- Sirmons, for instance, did try hard to save his son -- parents and

suicide prevention advocates agree many suicides are preventable. Most suicide victims could have been helped by counseling or saved by someone noticing and reporting disturbing behavior.

But suicide rarely gets the public attention that other health issues receive. Imagine the response, prevention advocates say, if the number of kids dying from cancer or diabetes jumped 60 percent over six years.

"What are we doing in our county?" asked Marilyn Koenig, who runs Friends for Survival, a local network for the families of suicide victims. "We've got a suicide hotline. That's it."

County officials are aware of the upward trend. "It's heartwrenching when you have a youth suicide," said Ann Edwards-Buckley, director of county mental health services. "But funding is always an issue."

Even though the county helped about 15,000 youths under 25 get counseling last year, just 20 percent of the children and young adults who committed suicide recently were among them, Edwards-Buckley said.

The problem is threefold. The stigma of mental illness causes youths to hide symptoms or prevents their families from seeking help. Some families of the dead said they weren't aware of available help. And, although counseling is free under Medi-Cal and the state's Healthy Families insurance plan, uninsured, poorer families or young adults who aren't covered by those programs typically must bear much of the cost.

Then there's the issue nearly everyone -- county officials, families, advocates, legislators -- agrees thwarts efforts to stop youth suicides: Nobody is coordinating prevention efforts in California. No entity is rustling the government, private groups and schools together for a unified attack. Other states, including Colorado and Nevada, have state suicide prevention offices that review trends and integrate efforts.

All of these factors hit south Sacramento and Oak Park particularly hard. The poverty, drugs and violence there can be symptoms as well as causes of suffering. And such suffering is evident in the stories of several of the area's young suicide victims.

Some, like 18-year-old Joshua Sirmons, fell into a deep abyss of mental illness.

Some, like 23-year-old Yang Yee Lee, succumbed to the lure of drugs.

Others, like 22-year-old Arturo Hader, struggled in their personal relationships.

And then there are those, like 12-year-old Ryan Brown, devastated by a major disruption in their home lives.

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