

The logo for the television series FRONTLINE, consisting of the word "FRONTLINE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a red rectangular background.

THE LOST CHILDREN OF ROCKDALE COUNTY

PBS airdate: Tuesday, October 19, 1999, 10 P.M., 90 minutes

They are young and from affluent families. They have been given the gifts of freedom, comfort and privilege. Their parents love them and have been able to provide good schools, the money to wear brand-name clothes, and a big house to live in. Yet despite their economic advantages, the children of Rockdale County, Georgia, are living in a suburban community plagued by a teenage syphilis outbreak; where a shooting rampage in the high school made national news; and a local sixteen-year-old boy was killed in a fight at a popular strip-mall parking lot.

On Tuesday, October 19, at 10 P.M. on PBS (check local listings), FRONTLINE explores the turbulent psychology of America's suburban teenagers in "The Lost Children of Rockdale County." This provocative ninety-minute film uncovers a parent's worst fears—group sex, binge drinking, drugs, and violence—beginning as early as ages twelve and thirteen.

Producers Rachel Dretzin Goodman and Barak Goodman spent more than five months living and working in Conyers and talking to teenagers about their lives. Several of the teens interviewed for the film are students at Heritage High School, site of the brutal shooting attack this past May. What brought FRONTLINE to Conyers, however, was not the shooting incident, but a very different—though inextricably related—occurrence.

Three years ago, as Conyers was preparing to host events for the Atlanta Summer Olympics, an outbreak of syphilis occurred in the community, exposing more than 200 teenagers. Many were between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. When epidemiologists seeking to stem the epidemic interviewed the teens about their sexual behavior, they were shocked by what they learned. Some reported fifty or more sexual partners by the time they were fourteen. Others told of regular sex parties at their homes while their parents were at work or out of town. Still others spoke of all-night orgies and group sex. Many came from comfortable, even affluent backgrounds, and few parents had any idea this was going on.

"Ultimately," says Kathleen Toomey, director, Georgia Division of Public Health, "much of the activity that was being carried out here was not coercive but rather taking part because of the desire to be part of a group. In fact, the girls who could perform even more outrageous sexual activities developed more status within this group of people. Were they victims in the traditional sense? Not at all. But were they victims of peer pressure? Yes, in the sense that they wanted to be part of this group so

desperately that they continued to have high-risk sexual activities simply to be accepted by this group of friends.”

“We came to see the syphilis outbreak in Rockdale County as a kind of metaphor for a deeper malady afflicting so many adolescents today,” says FRONTLINE producer Rachel Dretzin Goodman. “Wherever we went, we met kids who were drifting—hungry for something to fill the void—left by too much time on their own and too little structure in their lives. The result was these spasms of violence and sexual precocity with little concern for the consequences.”

Working from within the Conyers syphilis epidemic, “The Lost Children of Rockdale County” presents a tableau of increasing alienation, loneliness, sexuality and violence among teens living there, and reveals parents who confess they don’t know how to—or are just too busy to—talk with their children about the important issues.

Located twenty-four miles east of downtown Atlanta on the interstate, Rockdale County is the second smallest county in Georgia, and one of its most prosperous. Once a small community of cow pastures and farmers, its population has swelled in the last two decades with professionals for whom Atlanta’s older suburbs are not far enough removed from the city. Today, the county is parsed into subdivisions named after far away paradises: “Martha’s Vineyard,” “Ivy Bluff,” and “Lochaven.” Some one hundred churches, mostly Baptist, crowd the landscape. Heritage High School, one of three in the county, is ranked among the best in all of Georgia.

But upon closer examination, there appears to be a hole at the center of this tranquil community. Neighbors talk of not knowing each other, of working too hard, and never having enough time for their children. A long strip mall of fast food restaurants and chain stores takes the place of the traditional town common. The teens have little to do but cruise the highway, hang out in parking lots, and get into trouble.

The 1996 syphilis outbreak centered on a close-knit group of teenagers. What characterized many of these fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds was a striking lack of supervision and an intense need to belong. Amy is one example. Blond and slight, Amy lived with her parents in a grand home in one of Rockdale County’s more affluent subdivisions. Amy’s life has had a typical trajectory—she was a happy child until adolescence, when she lost her best friend to a more popular clique and, soon afterwards, lost her spot on the cheerleading team. “After that...I felt depressed a lot,” Amy says, “I was just real unhappy.”

But what makes Amy different from countless other teenagers who have suffered the same disappointments is the extreme spiral into which she was thrown—drinking, using drugs, and binge sex. Amy says she knew that her behavior was wrong, and she never enjoyed it. But she wanted so desperately to fit in, that she would not, and could not, say no. “I guess they just gave me enough friendship that I was looking for. I didn’t think that I could get any better friends. Because the people at school were really popular, and they just didn’t really notice me.”

For the other kids in the group, their behavior was a frantic cry for attention. Nicole strikes a tough pose. She spent the early years of her adolescence on her own, doing as she pleased while her

mother, who has been divorced twice, was out dating. Without a strong parental hand, Nicole developed into a child with contempt for authority, who stopped at nothing—not even violence—to enforce her will. “She’s willing to go to any extreme to get what she wants,” says her mother, Cindy.

Nicole says that until recently, her mother has always been afraid of her, afraid to discipline her, and afraid to tell her no. “My mom will tell you she was scared of me. She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know how to handle me. She kind of felt it was all her fault that this was happening because of the divorce and everything that went on.”

Peggy Cooper, a former guidance counselor in the Rockdale County school system, says it is only natural for children to come into this world craving attention. “They’ll get good attention as long as they can get it,” she says. “If they can’t get good attention, they’ll get bad attention...the worst thing in the world to them is to have no attention. No attention is to lead a solitary life. These kids are extremely lonely.”

And the parents, in many cases, feel helpless. As Amy’s father, Frank, tells FRONTLINE, “I don’t believe I can put enough pressure on my daughters to overcome...the social pressure that’s put on them out there. There’s just no way to do it.”

Access FRONTLINE ONLINE at www.pbs.org/frontline for a special Web site on this report, including:

- essays by national experts on teenagers and families. They will assess this story in light of what’s happening to teenagers nationwide;
- a closer look at Rockdale County’s syphilis outbreak, including reports from the investigating epidemiological team; facts and statistics on adolescent sexual activity;
- background reports on the community of Rockdale County and how it responded to the crisis;
- interviews with the children, their parents and other members of the community;
- readings and resources on pressures faced by teenagers and information and advice for parents and communities.

“The Lost Children of Rockdale County” is produced by Rachel Dretzin Goodman and Barak Goodman.

Original musical score by Paul Mertens and Susan Voelz of “Poy Dog Pondering.”

Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers.

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