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**Behind the scenic landscapes, on the backroads aof rural Massachusetts, is a world of poverty and abuse, violence and desperation;
HIDDEN MASSACHUSETTS;
First of three parts**

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It's dim and stale in the basement lockup at district court, the sickly yellow walls echoing the tales of a thousand petty criminals who have sat here waiting to see the judge upstairs. There are two cells, each with heavy steel bars painted black. There are no windows.

In the far cell, on the edge of a wooden bench, sits a stocky, babyfaced 11-year-old with straight brown hair that's cut short. He stares at a concrete wall where someone has scratched the words "White Power." In the corner is a shiny, metal toilet welded to the wall.

He is Chevy Van **Pickup** - so named because his parents thought it sounded cool. He's here for allegedly mugging a woman outside a package store in Athol, a small town near the New Hampshire border where he lives.

Chevy already is the youngest child in the custody of the state Department of Youth Services, the agency that oversees the treatment and punishment of kids in trouble.

His rap sheet would be impressive if he were an adult, never mind a child a decade shy of the legal drinking age.

Athol police first picked him up when he was 5 years old (his mother can't remember what he did). When Chevy was 7 years old, the youngest age at which someone can be charged with a crime in Massachusetts, he was arrested four times - once for attacking another student with a trumpet.

Now confined to a facility for young criminals in Lancaster, Chevy spends his free time making cards for his grandfather and trying to earn good behavior points so he can buy presents for his sisters. For the first time, he is learning how to read.

On the rare occasions his mother visits, Chevy repeatedly asks for hugs and tells her how much he loves her.

Head west from Boston, past the pricey suburbs, beyond the bustle of Interstate 495, and you'll find some of the loveliest landscapes in New England.

But it's a cruelly deceiving portrait.

Behind the pastoral facade live some of the poorest, most violent, most abused, and desperate young people in the state. This is the hidden Massachusetts - the tragic, ugly underside of a state renowned for prestigious universities, famous hospitals, high incomes, and educated residents.

In many towns and small cities along Route 2, where tourists crowd maple sugar stands, assaults are more widespread than in Boston or Springfield.

South of the Quabbin Reservoir, a stone's throw from antique shops and Old Sturbridge Village, there are towns with more high school dropouts, pregnant teenagers, and families on food stamps per capita than in Brockton or Lynn.

And in parts of Berkshire County, where the well-to-do spend summer nights sipping wine on the lawn at Tanglewood, the rate of child abuse is the highest in Massachusetts.

Police and city officials in Boston, 80 miles from Chevy's house in Athol, brag about a drop in juvenile crime and earn praise nationally for their efforts. It's just part of a steady diet of good news in the Boston area these days: Home sales are up, unemployment down, consumer confidence high.

But police chiefs in many small towns watch as their crime rates soar. Child protection officials may tout an overall decline in reported child abuse, but in some places out here, it's happening more and more.

People in these towns talk not of success stories, but of a lost generation growing up without hope on the backroads of Massachusetts.

"People in Boston think I am dealing with Mayberry RFD," says Southbridge Police Chief Michael Stevens. "They don't know anything. I've got big-city problems."

Passing time, making trouble

Before he was sent off to Lancaster, Chevy often roamed the streets of downtown Athol. It wasn't that long ago that Main Street pulsed with the comings and goings of thousands of factory workers. On Thursdays, payday at the two biggest mills, stores stayed open until 9 p.m.

Today, clothing shops and theaters have given way to human service agencies. One of the few remaining industries is the casket manufacturer where Chevy's father worked before he died. The buzz on the street comes not from shoppers, but the "benchies," teenagers who hang out on Main Street benches, doing drugs and harassing passersby.

Teenagers in towns like Athol complain they are trapped. They say there is nothing to keep them busy and no buses or subways to take them to malls or theaters. When they quit school or graduate, they quickly find out there are few jobs that pay more than \$ 6 an hour.

For some, making trouble is an easy way to pass the time.

It was three teenagers from Athol who captured national headlines two years ago when they embarked on a wild crime spree down the Eastern Seaboard that ended with the shotgun murder of an elderly Florida man in his home.

In Greenfield, a 22-year-old mildly retarded man was slowly tortured to death in 1995 by four men he considered his friends, police say.

And last August, two teenage Sturbridge girls were brutally beaten to death with a log, allegedly by an older man who regularly offered to buy beer for young girls in town.

Many in Athol, a town of 11,588 residents, dismiss the Florida incident as an aberration, pointing out that murders are still rare and crimes committed by strangers an exception. Residents of other rural towns make the same point.

But clearly, life has changed.

Once cherished for their simple ethos of hard work, many of these former farming and industrial centers are among the most violent places in the state.

Of the 30 communities with the highest rates of assault, eight are located along scenic Route 2, from Interstate 495 to the New York border.

Some of the youngest children ordered into state custody in the past two years come from similar towns just the other side of the Quabbin Reservoir.

They include two 12-year-olds from Ware; two 13-year-olds from Warren and West Brookfield; and a 13-year-old Brookfield boy committed this June for possession of a hypodermic syringe.

Ask anybody - a teacher, a cop or a social worker - what went wrong and what can be done to fix it, and the answer is always the same: The good jobs left and until they are replaced things will probably get worse.

"The lack of an economic future for these kids is unbelievable," says Lynne Simonds, who coordinates youth programs in the Central Massachusetts town of Ware. "Look around: They see what you see. People out of work, hanging on street corners. They choose crime as a way to make a living."

Life in the **Pickup** house

The walls of the bedroom once shared by Chevy and his brother Michael, 13, are filthy and filled with holes. Graffiti, some of it obscene, explicit and aimed at Athol police, is everywhere.

Chevy's three sisters - aged 7, 9, and 12 - share the bedroom across the hall. The kitchen is so small the refrigerator is in the girls' room. All of the children sleep on mattresses placed on the floor. Their mother, Bugsy **Pickup**, 33, sleeps on the couch.

When he's not in state custody, this tiny apartment in a former single-family house off Route 2A is the center of Chevy's world.

Prominently displayed on a closet door near the kitchen are clippings from local newspapers reporting crimes committed by Chevy and some of Michael's friends. The stories never reveal the boys' names. In one of the stories, Chevy is identified only as "Charlie." Bugsy has drawn a line through "Charlie" and written "Chevy." She is angry the newspaper didn't identify him, taking the omission as a slight against her child. Bugsy also has written the name of Michael's friend over a story about a 13-year-old boy suspended from the middle school after bringing Internet bomb-making instructions to class.

There is an award given to Michael in 1989 for outstanding attendance in kindergarten; during the past two years, Michael has hardly gone to school at all. There are pictures of family and friends, including one where a boy is shown flashing his middle finger.

Harder to find, on a wall in the far corner of the kitchen, is the award given to 9-year-old Kristina this fall when she was named student of the month at her school.

Lined around the small living room are several cages. They are home to three iguanas, a rosy boa, a ball python, a tarantula, and mice, which are fed to the snakes every so often.

It's a busy place, day and night.

There is a steady stream of social workers and counselors. The police are also frequent visitors. A small army of family and friends always seems to be seated at the kitchen table, where Bugsy holds court while smoking her GPC brand cigarettes, just \$ 1.36 a pack over the border in New Hampshire, easily the cheapest around. Some come for a few beers and laughs, others to share a cigarette and their latest problems. The best times are had around the first of the month, when everyone is full of money and optimism after receiving their government checks.

One constant is an upstairs neighbor, a 36-year-old man who sometimes helps Chevy with woodworking projects. Hobbled by a back injury, the man is often out of work, always cursing and never without a can of Budweiser. He is fiercely protective of Bugsy, describing her as his best friend. He is also a sex offender, convicted in 1991 of raping a 15-year-old girl.

Other men come and go, but always seem to be drinking.

Most of the time, the children and their friends huddle in the boys' bedroom with the stereo blaring, while the adults hang out in the kitchen with the television on. Bugsy and a young woman who lives upstairs take turns baby-sitting, so it is not unusual to find a dozen kids in Bugsy's small apartment.

There are four apartments in this building, but one is empty and boarded up. The third apartment is occupied by the "Puerto Ricans." Buggy and the upstairs neighbor don't know the family's name, only that they came from Lawrence.

Outside, the **Pickup** kids hang around the nearby uptown common or wander downtown, a half-mile away. The family doesn't have a car - one in seven families in Athol doesn't - so in the summer they sometimes walk an hour to go swimming at their grandfather's house in Orange.

Buggy doesn't work. She survives on a monthly widow's benefit of \$ 1,200 from Social Security and about \$ 180 a month in food stamps. Her rent is \$ 400 a month, and she is responsible for utility and cable TV bills that total about \$ 100 a month.

Asked how a family of six survives on a little less than \$ 17,000 a year, Buggy answers, "You just do it."

Kids in court

Every other Friday at Orange District Court is juvenile court day. It's the busiest day of the court calendar, one that Chevy's lawyer, David Roulston, compares to a bus station the day before Christmas.

It's easy to see why the only juvenile judge here is pleading with her Boston superiors for help. The 430 cases she handled in 1995 are more than or equal to urban courts in Fitchburg, East Boston, Pittsfield and Somerville.

On this perfect October day, the courthouse lobby is packed beyond capacity. Chevy and his brother Michael are among those waiting, although Chevy is forced to sit in a locked cell in the basement after arriving from a DYS facility in Lancaster.

The first specific crime by Chevy that Buggy can recall is the time he stole batteries, cigarette lighters, staples and a stapler from the CVS downtown.

When Athol police showed up to question Chevy about the trumpet attack when he was 7, Buggy opened the door and said, "I can't do anything with him. Maybe you hit the woman in the back of the head, and as she fell to the ground Chevy kicked her. Then, police charge, the boys took her wallet, with \$ 104 inside. The woman was left bloodied and swollen.

Michael, wearing an oversized Chicago Bulls jacket and black jeans, spends most of his time wading through the courthouse crowd, seeing if friends are here. They are. There are others here, too. A 10-year-old boy from the hill town of Warwick charged with threatening to kill his teacher. A teenage girl being sentenced for molesting a child she was baby-sitting. A 10-year-old Athol boy and his 12-year-old brother in for assault and battery, and breaking and entering.

With one exception, the juveniles are white, mirroring the towns where they live. Despite a recent influx of black and Hispanic families, referred to as "foreigners" by many locals, most communities remain more than 98 percent white.

Several of the teenagers in court, however, have adopted a style that leads other kids to derisively call them "Wiggers" - slang for "white niggers." They wear clothes made popular by young black musicians, subscribe to African-American magazines such as Vibe, and listen to rap music. Some do it for the look; others because they think it makes them tougher.

There are also several girls waiting outside the courtroom, including some who bring their babies with them.

For Buggy, hanging around court is a familiar routine.

In addition to the boys, 7-year-old Laurie Jay has stood before the judge here and is on probation for stealing cigarettes from a convenience store. Recently, she was thrown out of school for swearing at her teacher and constantly running out of class. She will not be allowed to return unless her mother sits in class with her.

"I think she is going to be just like Chevy," Buggy says.

On this day, Chevy's case is continued because the victim in the package store mugging left court early. Michael isn't here for the package store assault; he's already been convicted in that case. Today he's facing charges of

threatening to kill a school official and possession of marijuana.

After waiting for most of the day, Micael's case is heard. He walks into the closed-door juvenile session with his mother, but walks out in handcuffs accompanied by a court officer. After listening to the charges against him, the judge sets bail at \$ 1,000 cash. It might as well have been \$ 1 million, Bugsy says later, because she doesn't have an extra \$ 10, never mind \$ 1,000.

"Mom, I don't want to go," Michael cries before being taken to a detention center in Springfield.

Bugsy, tears streaming down her face, gives him a hug.

Visiting day

When Bugsy and her two youngest daughters arrive at the Elizabeth Birk Oatis Children's Center in Lancaster, Chevy is all smiles, excited to have visitors for the first time since he arrived three months earlier.

Even though the package store assault charges were dismissed, Chevy will be in state custody until he's 18 because of previous assault and larceny convictions.

He gives his mom a bracelet he made and shows her the skeleton of a wooden clock he is building for her. For his sisters, Chevy has accumulated enough points for good behavior to buy them some balls, jacks, and pens.

Bugsy has brought Chevy new underwear, a winter jacket and a sweatshirt. She is concerned about a rash on his arm and asks if he is being treated well. She seems satisfied by his answers.

Chevy is a polite and courteous boy who repeatedly offers a visitor water from a pitcher and apples he picked on a recent field trip. He wears a black Reebok T-shirt, sweat pants, and Air Nike hightop sneakers.

"He's a cute kid," says Athol Police Chief Thomas R. Button, "who doesn't show any remorse for what he does." Indeed, when Bugsy asks Chevy why he steals things, he shrugs his shoulders and says, "I just felt like it."

When the talk turns to schoolwork, Chevy tells his mother he is being taught to read. A month later, he'll proudly announce he has read three books on his own.

Asked why he never learned to read while in school in Athol - a town where reading scores for fourth graders are among the lowest in the state, ranking below Worcester and New Bedford - Chevy complains, "They never took time to teach me."

Whether Chevy will be allowed to return home or transfer to another program before he is released from DYS custody in seven years depends upon his progress.

"I think there is hope for him," says John E. Mara, director of pupil services for Athol schools. "I have a feeling he will make it."

Chevy and Bugsy are more guarded in their predictions.

"The counselors say Chevy is 16 to 18 years old streetwise," says Bugsy. "In residential, all he is learning is bigger and better things. He's already told me about how you use someone else's Social Security number so the cops don't know who you are . . . Chevy's going to come out stealing cars and robbing stores."

Asked what he thinks will happen when he is allowed to go home, Chevy doesn't hesitate.

"I will try not to get in trouble, but I know I will. Even if I don't get in trouble, someone will call the police and say I did something. I wish we could go somewhere else. I wish I could get out of Athol."

A mother's story

Bugsy is 33, but looks older. A burly woman with straight black hair tucked behind her ears, she has large forearms that display numerous tattoos, including "High," "Chevy," and a marijuana leaf. She has "Bugsy" tattooed across the

fingers of her right hand.

Like Chevy, Bugsy was in and out of trouble when growing up in Orange. She was born Patrice Tolman, but was always called Bugsy because she was fascinated by insects as a kid.

When she was 16, her mother sent her to live with a relative in Oklahoma. It was there that she met her husband, a Native American named Guy James **Pickup**.

Ten years ago, Bugsy and her husband returned to Massachusetts to find work, but instead found themselves unemployed and living in a teepee in the woods of Orange with three children, including Chevy, who was less than a year old.

After three months in the woods, welfare officials placed the family in a series of motels from Fitchburg to Erving. Without a car, the family often hitchhiked on Route 2.

Bugsy's husband, whom she called Jim but everyone else in town called "Injun," eventually landed a job at one of Athol's largest employers - a casket manufacturer. The money allowed them to move into an apartment on nearby Freedom Street.

For the next four years, life was good for the **Pickups**.

But on July 21, 1990, Jim drowned in nearby Silver Lake after a full day of drinking. Bugsy was with him at the lake, but had no idea what happened until the police called her out of a local bar three hours after the accident.

"I just assumed he swam across and was partying with friends," she said.

For the next year, Bugsy said, she drank every day.

'I am trying my best'

Bugsy's competence as a mother is constantly being scrutinized. So far, no one has found her to be unfit.

Her children are always well-fed, clean and dressed appropriately. She shows up at every court hearing, every counseling session, every meeting at school.

"There are parents out there who don't want their kids," she says. "I want them and am trying my best. . . . They always blame me, like I tell them to steal or beat up on someone. Chevy even told them once, 'Why are you blaming my mother?' It ain't my fault."

But some of those who work with the **Pickups** are frustrated by Bugsy, complaining the children get nothing from their mother beyond the basics.

When the youngest, Laurie Jay, brings work home from school, there is little acknowledgment of her effort. When it is time for Bugsy to leave after her visit with Chevy, it is the 11-year-old boy who has to prompt his mother for a hug and kiss. As she walks away, Chevy repeatedly yells, "I love you."

Bugsy does get excited when two of the girls come home, out of breath, to report a fight they just had with another girl. Bugsy's daughters say the scuffle began after the girl made some disparaging comments about the **"Pickups."** The news that her girls had beat up the other girl prompts Bugsy to scream with delight and high-five the kids.

No one is quite sure how to explain the success of 9-year-old Kristina, "a great kid," according to Bugsy. Asked why she is different, Bugsy answers: "I couldn't tell ya."

But she does credit Kristina's teacher, Mr. Marshall, with taking a special interest in her daughter. He helped Kristina pay for her class pictures and bought her a flute so she could take music class.

Kristina knows she is different. After Bugsy screams at her oldest daughter, Krystal, for hanging around with the wrong crowd and shoves her into the bedroom, Kristina is taken aback by her mother's comments that all of her kids are headed for the same kind of trouble as Chevy and Michael.

"Even me?" she asks plaintively. "No, not you," Buggy sighs as she sits down to catch her breath.

The public price

There is no shortage of help for the **Pickups**, almost all of it paid for by taxpayers.

There is a DSS worker, a DYS worker, a counselor from the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, after-hours school counselors, child psychiatrists, and public defenders.

In addition, taxpayers are picking up the enormous cost of placing Chevy and Michael in DYS custody. The state and Athol schools are sharing a \$ 75,000-a-year bill for Chevy's stay in Lancaster. The program in Springfield where Michael is serving his DYS commitment costs \$ 63,946 per year.

"By the time these kids are 18, the state will have spent a million dollars on them," says one of their social workers.

But no one seems happy with the results.

"I don't have faith in nobody no more," says Buggy. "These kids need help."

Patricia Engerman, the family's DSS worker, is frustrated by what she sees as positive steps taken by the boys quickly erased by tough judges or vindictive cops.

"No one gives these kids a chance," she complains.

The family's DYS worker, John Jones, says families like the **Pickups** need more aggressive help and they need it earlier.

"By the time they get to us, it is too late," he says. "Something needed to happen years and years ago. Something substantial where people were held accountable."

Unfortunately, Jones said, little is changing and DYS is as busy as ever.

"Business is good with us," he says. "Is this an isolated case? I don't think so."

DYS commitments

Rate of children in DYS custody and municipal rank. PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA
GLOBE STAFF CHART
Globe Online

Databases with information about education, income, crime and other quality-of-life issues for all 351 Massachusetts cities and towns - as well as this series and extra photographs - are on Globe Online at <http://www.boston.com>. The keyword is hidden.

LOAD-DATE: March 11, 1997

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO MAP CHART, 1. Laurie Jay **Pickup**, 7, tries to get some privacy by snaking the telephone into her brothers' bedroom. 2. Chevy Van **Pickup**, on a 24-hour leave from DYS custody, gets a welcome-home headlock from family friend Bill Chase. 3. After a day of drinking, family friend Bill Chase rests his head on Buggy **Pickup's** shoulder as her daughter Krystal looks on. 4. Buggy **Pickup** waits to see her son Michael, 13, outside the lockup at Greenfield Superior Court. GLOBE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL GREENE

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