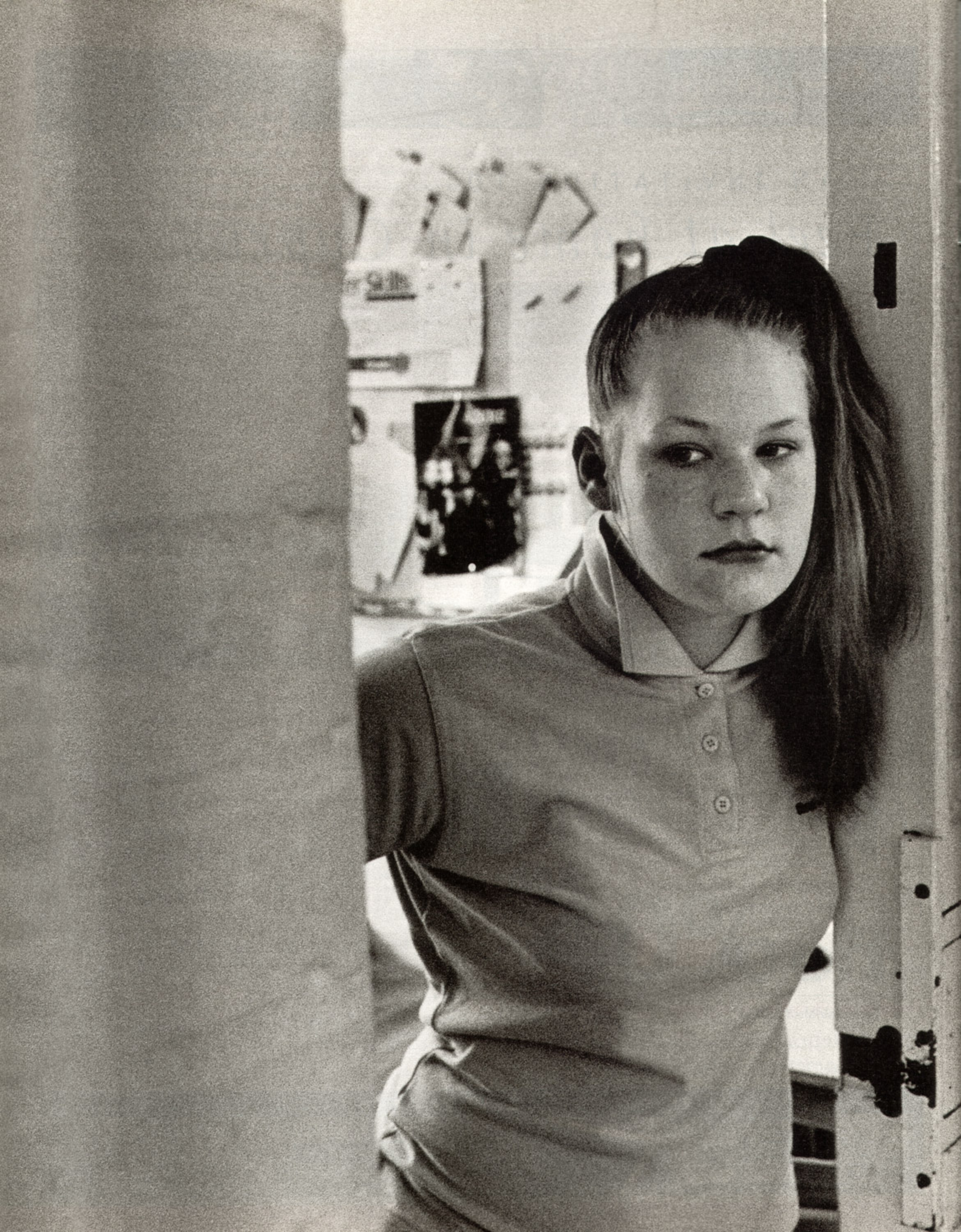


# SCHOOL OF HARD LOCKS

**Prison is not a suitable place for teenage girls, the government says. So why are more and more of them being put away? Christine Toomey investigates. Photographs by Harriet Logan**

How do you think your life would look now if a synopsis of your childhood read like this? "I was 10 years old when I came home from school and found a note from my mum saying, 'Here's 20 quid. Find your own way to your dad.' I never saw her again. I was living in Bournemouth then. My dad was in Bracknell. I got on a train and found my dad. But he uses coke and heroin. I stayed with him for a few months. Then I was put with a foster family. I ran away and started living rough" – Rachel, 17.

"My stepdad pushed me downstairs and kicked me in the face when I was 12. I was never good again. I was excluded from school. I ran away. When the police took me home, my mum said she didn't want me. I was put into care. I was 16 when I was raped" – Samantha, 17.

"I never knew my dad. I lived with my grandad most of the time. My mum used to come home now and then. When Grandad died, everything went haywire. I was expelled from school. Then I started whizzing [taking speed]. My mum's back for good now, though. I think I can look after her" – Leighann, 17.

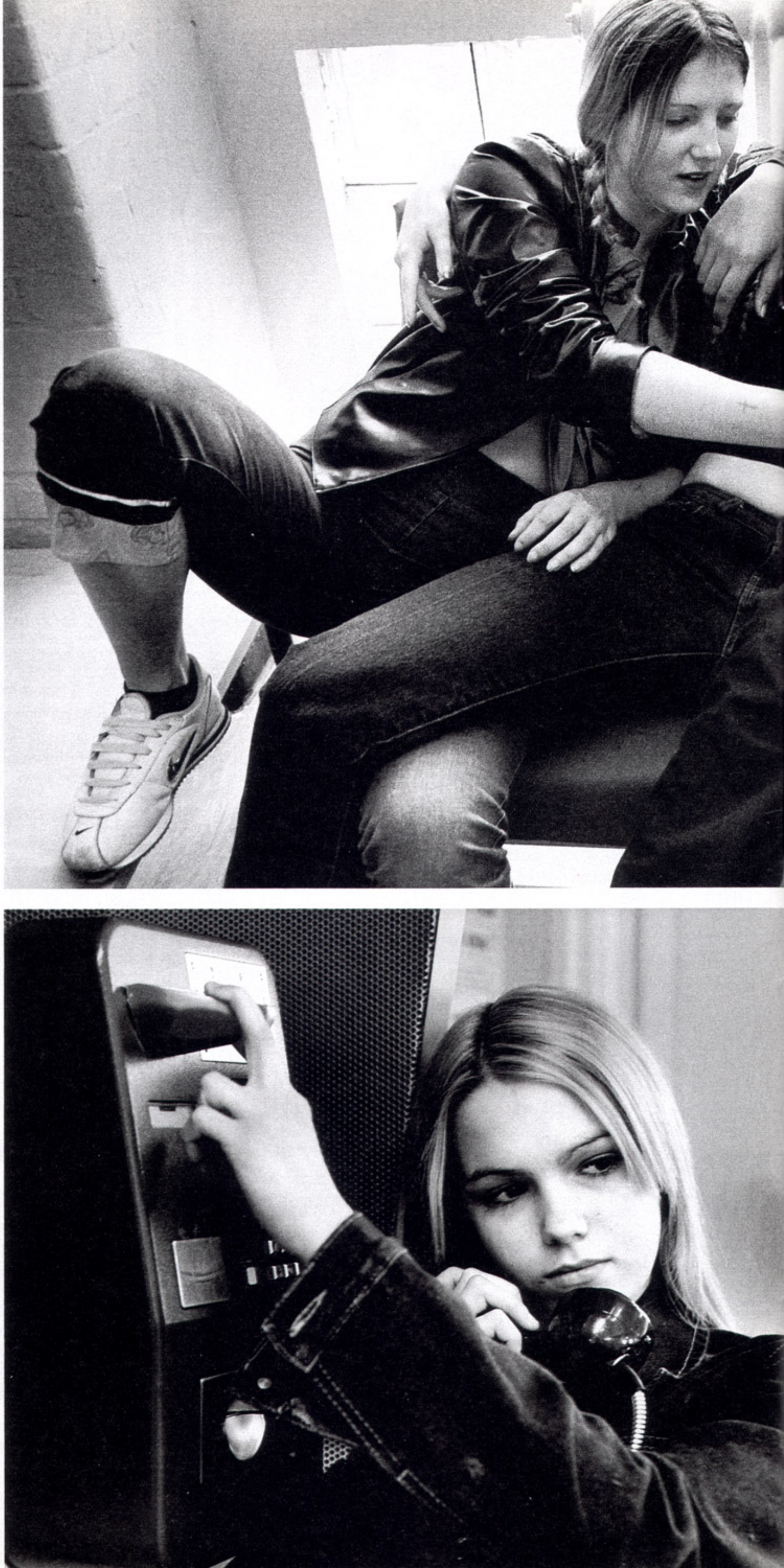
Despite such bleak beginnings, these girls harbour hopes for the future. Samantha wants to go to college, to study IT. She wants her own home and a dog. Rachel, a softly spoken teenager with long blonde hair, took a hairdressing course and talks of working in a salon one day. Leighann wants to be a singer. "I used to want to be a social worker. I like helping people. I don't think I could stick the seven-year course, though," says the fidgety teenager, her hair scraped back in plaits.

But before they've reached their 18th birthdays, the courts have thrown another hurdle to fulfilling any of these hopes in the girls' way. All three have been sent to prison. Samantha has a 12-month sentence for attempting to steal a mobile phone. Rachel is serving eight months for burglary. She had been stealing to feed a drug habit. Leighann is serving 18 months for stabbing the boyfriend of a girl who was taunting her while she was high on speed. Under the terms of the detention and training orders (DTOs) to which these three have been sentenced, half their time will be served in prison, half under supervision in the community.

Failed by the most important people in their lives, the girls have now been failed by the British government and legal system. For Rachel, Samantha and Leighann are among more than 120 girls aged between 15 and 17 serving prison sentences in England and Wales. More than twice that number are expected to be imprisoned this year. Many of them, like these three, are at HMP Bullwood Hall in Essex, which houses a volatile mix of adolescent girls and young offenders together with some of our most dangerous female prisoners – 31 women serving life sentences for manslaughter, wounding, arson or murder.

Five years ago, the High Court ruled that sending girls to adult prisons was unlawful. The





**Previous pages: Rachel, 17, who is serving an eight-month sentence for burglary. Left: Leighann (far left) and Samantha, both 17. Below: Cherelle, just turned 16; she was sentenced for assault**

## 'MY STEPDAD PUSHED ME DOWNSTAIRS AND KICKED ME IN THE FACE WHEN I WAS 12'

SAMANTHA, 17-YEAR-OLD PRISONER

prison service responded by redesignating prisons holding girls together with women as both adult prisons and young-offender institutions. Three years ago, the government declared it was its "first priority to place the youngest and most vulnerable young women outside the prison service". Jack Straw, then home secretary, announced that "from April 2000, 15- and 16-year-old girls will be placed in local-authority care and not in prison". The government also intended, he said, to place "all sentenced young women aged 17... outside prison custody". Last year, the Youth Justice Board vowed it was its "absolute priority to place all young women outside adult prisons by mid-2002". Earlier this year, the lord chief justice, Lord Woolf, urged magistrates and judges to consider the explosion in the female prison population before jailing female offenders, especially for non-violent crimes or first-time offences.

Yet the number of juvenile girls being sent to prison has continued to rise steadily over the past decade. The number in prison on March 31 this year was more than four times as many as at the same time in 1992, while the number serving prison sentences in 2000, the last year for which Home Office figures are available, was 304 – more than treble the number sent to prison 10 years ago. Despite popular perceptions about "ladette culture", and headlines suggesting the growing prevalence of "terrifying", "nasty" and "sickening" girl gangs, crime among under-18-year-old girls in England and Wales decreased every year from 1992 to 2000. In 2000, the number of girls aged 15 to 17 who were found guilty or cautioned was over 30% less than eight years before.

Not only does sending girls to adult prisons – be they renamed – contravene a High Court ruling; it also contradicts repeated pledges by the government, dismays every prison officer and governor interviewed for this article, and violates international law. Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that detention should be used as a last resort for children under 18 and that, when it is inevitable, children should be held separately from adult offenders. The British government reserved the right not to implement this article "where the mixing of adults and children is deemed to be mutually beneficial". The Home Office and prison service subsequently argued that it was in the best interests of girls to be held with adult offenders, as the older women "tend to mother the youngsters and provide a calmer atmosphere".

Calm? Motherly? Judge for yourself.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The approach to HMP Bullwood Hall appears tranquil enough. Skirting the edge of a small nature reserve, the road winds past pink-painted thatched cottages covered with climbing roses, through an avenue of beech trees and giant firs before turning right and coming to an abrupt halt. The gates of the prison are flanked with colourful hanging baskets. After passing through five iron-grilled gates to the left of the main building, you come to a long wooden hut that wouldn't look out of place on a camp site, its windows all ajar, allowing the sound of chirping birds to be heard. They are budgerigars, kept to comfort prisoners, lined up in cells inside the hut. This is G-wing – the lifer unit. Separated from the hut by a covered walkway, the rest of the prison is divided into five wings. During one week in June, four of these wings held 105 young offenders – women aged between 18 and 21. The fifth wing, A-wing, was reserved for "the most vulnerable prisoners": 31 juveniles, girls aged 17 and under, including six girls aged 16 and three 15-year-olds.

In theory, young offenders and juveniles at Bullwood Hall are kept separate from women ⟶



PHOTOGRAPHS: NETWORK

serving life sentences. In practice, this is impossible. Not only do all the inmates eat and exercise together, but they also have group discussions once a week, meet up in the education sector of the prison, and get together for choir practice – an occasion one blunt worker in the prison service described as "a good opportunity to swap drugs". No matter how vigilant they are, prison officers say, drugs are smuggled in.

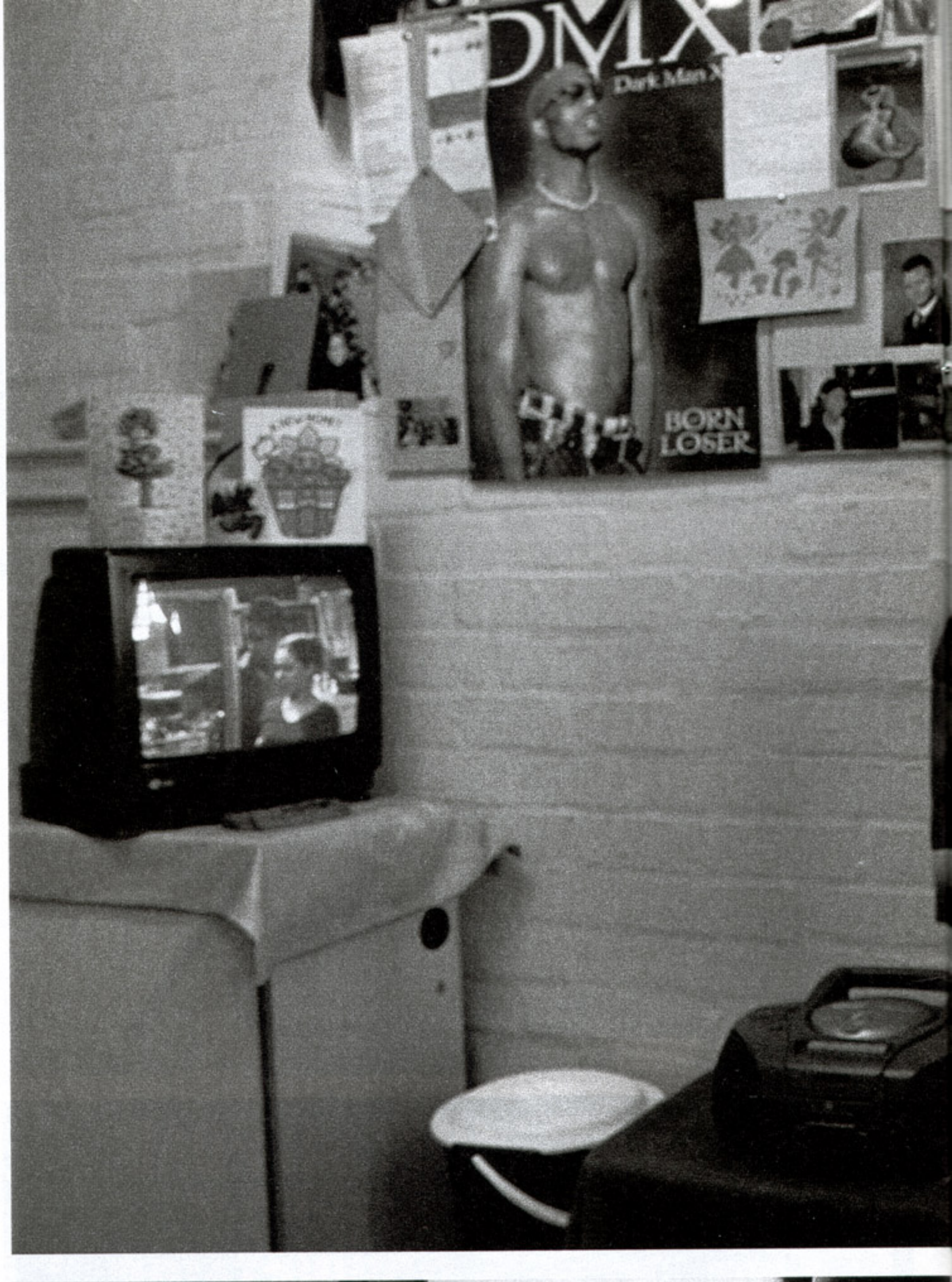
The sight of Bullwood Hall's choir practising on a Wednesday evening in the small chapel at the back of the canteen, while supposed to be uplifting, is somehow chilling. In the front row, a group of six middle-aged "lifers" grip their hymn sheets with determination. Behind them, a group of adolescent girls link arms, swaying from side to side with the music as if they're auditioning for a talent contest. All except one nervous-looking girl at the end of the row, with a pink plastic rosary round her neck and a deep blush.

This is Natalie, 17, from Poplar, east London. She is serving 12 months for attacking another girl with a bottle when she was 16. It is her first offence. She has 10 GCSEs. She was arrested the day she started work as an office junior in Surrey Docks. "I was quiet and shy in school. But there was this one girl who kept making fun of me. She left before I did, but I'd still see her on the street. My grandad died a few weeks before I got into a fight with her. He was the one who held our family together. When I saw her after that, I just snapped. She gave me a dirty look and I ran after her. I had a bottle in my hand. I tried to give it to a friend. But I couldn't. So the bottle was in my hand when I hit her. She only had a little scar on her forehead. Her big sister came and beat me up after that. But I was the one who got arrested."

Natalie was sent to Holloway for two weeks before being transferred to Bullwood Hall. For reasons of economy, the firm contracted to transport prisoners round the country waits until it has a number of inmates before transferring them from the north London prison, where most female prisoners in the south of England are taken after sentencing. None of them are supposed to stay at Holloway for more than three days. Some spend several weeks there.

"I hated Holloway. I cried nonstop. I was in shock. It's filthy; 99% of the population seemed to be crack-heads and tramps. We were banged up 23 hours a day. Then I came here, and it hit me that I was really in prison to stay. I'll have a prison record for the next five years now. I don't know what that's going to do for me getting a job. My mum's too scared to visit me here. I'm scared too. I don't go near the older women. If they're in here for life, they must've done something really serious."

The youngest prisoner on A-wing at the time of my visit is a slight 15-year-old called Cherelle from Mitcham, Surrey. She has been placed on a "suicide watch". She has an 18-month sentence for assaulting a woman on a train and trying to snatch her handbag. Cherelle had been in trouble before. Her mother had taken her out of school when she was 12, she says, because she was being bullied. "My mum used to say one day I





**Charlie (above) and Vera (left), both 18, were caught bringing in drugs from Jamaica. 'I was naive,' Vera says. 'I didn't know they'd sealed 2½ kilos of cocaine inside the lining of my bag'**

**'EACH TIME WE LOCK A YOUNG PERSON UP, WE'VE FAILED AS A SOCIETY'**

**JULIET LYON, PRISON REFORM TRUST**

cabinet in the officers' quarters – alongside a notice of alarm codes for inmates found bleeding, unconscious or having attempted suicide – is a stark reminder of the fragility of the prisoners' mental health. "Before we bolted the metal beds to the floor, about eight months ago, we would regularly open up the cell doors and have to pull down swingers," says another officer. "Swingers" is prison jargon for inmates who attempt to hang themselves; "cutters" are those who self-harm.

A profile of juvenile girls and women under 21 held in prison, summarised in a recent Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) report entitled Bad Girls or Bad Laws?, paints a bleak picture of their mental and physical health: 37% reported having attempted suicide; 15% had a history of self-harm; 76% reported misusing drugs and alcohol; 40% were on medication such as antidepressants or sleeping pills; 10% had been in a psychiatric hospital; 30% had received some psychiatric care; 65% had experienced family breakdown; 27% had been in care, and almost half had been sexually abused as children.

Slowly, Cherelle starts talking about her background. Her father, she says, had died a few months before she was arrested. "He's buried in Bognor, my dad. He was young when he got sick. It was alcohol. His heart and liver gave up. Half the time he didn't know how old I was. I used to steal cars and drive up and down outside the house waiting for him to tell me off. But he never did."

For many girls at Bullwood Hall, the routine of prison life is their first experience of any real limits being set on their behaviour. The brutalising effect of prison is, however, delivering other lessons. "I was stupid," says Cherelle, who is due to be released on Boxing Day. "This has taught me a lesson. But by the time I get out, I will be used to prison. There are people in here who do drugs. They talk about it a lot. It has made me want to do drugs too. I think it would be enough to bring kids here for a night or two. That would make them think. All you hear is keys locking and unlocking doors, girls screaming and shouting at night. I see some of the girls talking to lifers. I would show people that I wouldn't stand for it no more. The woman I hit didn't do nothing to me. But it felt like self-defence. I can't explain it. I know it don't make sense."

At first, Cherelle tries to cultivate a tough image. Like Natalie, she had spent nearly two weeks at Holloway. "I was really scared. I used to look at the birds flying around outside the bars of my cell window and wish I was them. At night you could hear girls screaming and smashing up their cells. But I got used to it. I made some friends. In the end, some of the older ones told me, 'If you can do Holloway, you can do anywhere.'"

Afterwards, a prison officer says Cherelle, now 16, could not stop crying when she arrived. Although she had not harmed herself, her records, he said, indicated she had self-harmed, possibly at Holloway. In her small cell, she has to stick letters from home on the wall with toothpaste.

An array of plastic razors, scissors, pencil sharpeners and metal spoons locked in a glass haven't yet. They seem scary."

Older girls, such as Rachel, have fewer qualms about mixing with the women serving life for murder. "I've made friends with a few of the older women. You can't be rude. You've got to chat," she says. "But they just want to make you do naughty things. The younger girls follow the older ones. Learn from them." Leighann, who is in the choir, also mixes with the older women: "Sometimes I listen to the lifers talk, and they don't seem the sort of people who would give anyone brain damage or kill them. But you learn quickly not to mention what they've done. The scarier ones are more nice. I feel sorry for them doling out their budgie seeds."

Those detained at Her Majesty's pleasure reciprocate less sympathy for girls. Sitting at a table next to the juveniles in the canteen one lunchtime, a group of older women grumble that "the DTOs" are given preferential treatment. They begrudge not being able to use the gym as much as the teenagers, and say prison life ⟶

should be made a lot tougher, "to teach them a proper lesson". One woman in her late twenties disagrees. "If they'd been given more care and attention, they'd never be here in the first place," she says. "Believe me. I know."

Samantha, who attends a discussion group with some of the older women on a Monday night, says: "The lifers look down on us. I just go to the group so's I don't get locked in my cell so early." The 17-year-old had been placed in four children's homes and with five foster families before she was 16. Like most of the girls, she talks tough. "At the end of the day, I did something wrong. Do the crime and you do the time." But she believes if she'd had to stay in Holloway a day longer, she would have tried to kill herself. "At least here they make you feel like you're worth something."

Few of the prison officers know details of the crimes for which the teenagers have been jailed. "It helps not to know," the governor, Tony Hassall, explains. "It avoids any personal prejudices about a girl's behaviour creeping into a prison officer's treatment of her. This makes any preferential treatment or discrimination less likely. And believe me," he says, "because of the background most of these girls have come from, their sense of injustice is very finely tuned." Such consideration reflects the sympathy that prison staff have for the girls in their charge. None of those I spoke to here, or later at Holloway, believe adolescent girls should be sentenced to prison – either together with adults or, in most cases, at all.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Following a harrowing 1997 report called Lost Inside, by the Howard League for Penal Reform, the government repeatedly stated that it accepted prison was not a suitable environment for girls. When the Youth Justice Board (YJB) was set up four years ago under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, it constituted a radical reform of the youth justice system, which was widely accepted as failing. The YJB was made responsible for commissioning and purchasing all places for 10- to 17-year-olds in custody, and has been praised for a more integrated approach to dealing with young offenders. It vowed it would "reconfigure the juvenile estate... with the provision of more appropriate accommodation for young women outside the prison service so that none are placed with adult offenders".

The YJB undertook to have extensions built to local-authority secure training units for both boys and girls at Medway in Kent and at Rainsbrook, near Rugby. These were to provide space for 64 more girls. Both were to be complete by the middle of this year. Rainsbrook is ready. Medway is not due for completion before the autumn. Further units are planned at Milton Keynes and Brentwood. But some within the prison service believe that, once judges are aware of extra capacity, they may sentence even more girls to custody. The economics of custodial sentences are that it costs around £1,000 a week to keep a girl in prison and two or three times as much to provide secure accommodation. The extra places are also expected to be taken up by the growing number of very young offenders targeted in the government's recent street-crime initiatives.

New government initiatives have been set up to help vulnerable young people and young families in the community, including schemes such as Sure Start, Newpin, and Education for Parenthood. In April 2000 the YJB concluded that "the courts are unlikely to increase the use of custody" for juveniles because of the work of its new youth-offending teams (YOTs), the new intensive supervision and surveillance programmes (ISSPs) and new community punishment orders, formerly known as community sentences.

Yet the fact that boys in custody outnumber girls by 20 to 1 militates against girls. There are no dedicated young-offender institutions for girls – separate from adult prisons – as there are for boys, and because there are fewer of them, it is argued that girls are less suited to community punishment orders, which generally cater for groups of a dozen or more boys doing jobs like clearing churchyards and painting scout huts. Also, because fewer jails take female juveniles, girls are more likely to be imprisoned far from home. Many girls sent to prison have children, who are farmed out to relatives, fostered, adopted or put in care. No government initiative will help a teenage girl sent to a prison far from home.

**'MY MUM'S TOO SCARED TO VISIT ME HERE. I'M SCARED TOO'**

**NATALIE, 17-YEAR-OLD PRISONER**

"Each time we lock up a child or young person, we have failed as a society," says Juliet Lyon of the Prison Reform Trust. "We have failed to exercise a duty of care for the young and the vulnerable. We have failed to support the family. And we have failed to prevent the next victim because, when these people leave prison, just over three-quarters of them will be reconvicted within two years. It is easier to work punitively than therapeutically with challenging adolescents. But the task of prisons is to be places of last resort for those very few for whom there is no alternative. Clearly, especially as far as girls are concerned, prisons are not being used as a place of last resort."

Lyon argues that, nearly a decade on, the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-old boys still has a profound effect on public attitudes to young offenders. After Robert Thompson and Jon Venables were sentenced, first to eight years in prison, and later to 15 years, the prime minister urged the public to "understand less and condemn more". When, in 2001, Thompson and Venables turned 18 and their sentences were reviewed by Lord Woolf, he took the view that a further period of detention would serve no useful purpose – particularly, he concluded, if it meant they would be transferred from a small specialist secure unit to what he described as the "corrosive atmosphere" of a young offenders' institution. He went on to stress the need for "proportionality in sentencing" and "humanity within the criminal justice system".

Yet such principles seem to have been overshadowed by the constant high-profile political rhetoric on crime. The mixed messages coming out of 10 Downing Street and the Home Office exacerbate the problem. At the same time as the home secretary warns courts to keep prison as a last resort for "all but violent and serious criminals", he talks of a clampdown on child "bail bandits" – child and teenage suspects who should be detained, he says, "regardless of the crimes they are accused of carrying out". Tony Blair, meanwhile, has talked of a "blitz" on teenage muggers. No matter how "horrible" it is to lock up teenagers, he says, it is the only option for hard-core offenders causing "mayhem on the streets". And Lord Woolf has warned would-be mobile-phone thieves that they face sentences of at least 18 months.

Research has shown that the harshness of all sentences is affected by political statements. The knock-on effect in Bullwood Hall is clearly visible. One 16-year-old serving an 18-month sentence for stealing three mobiles said she stole one from another girl "because she stepped on the back of my trainer and didn't say sorry".

Female offenders, girls and women alike, are doubly punished, some argue, partly for what they have done and partly because the crime is not the sort of behaviour expected of them. Pat Carlen, visiting professor of criminology at Keele university and author of several books on the experiences of female offenders in jail, says they are all too often punished for offending against stereotypical ideas of "how nice girls behave". "Female offenders have totally different experiences of crime than male offenders," Carlen argues. "They don't mix with criminals as much, they don't think of themselves as criminals and their criminal careers are shorter and less violent. It is personal circumstances that get them into trouble. Yet when they do offend, this is seen as indicative of a criminal character." ⟿

Dr Anne Worrall, a colleague of Carlen's at Keele, says this is partly due to a "backlash against women's liberation". "Behaviour that would have been regarded 10 years ago as that of a very difficult girl, with a lot of problems in need of intensive intervention, is now regarded simply as criminal," she says. "The attitude is that if girls want equal treatment, they will get it." This view is echoed by the response of a spokeswoman for the Magistrates' Association, asked why more girls were being sent to prison. "It is the bad side of feminism," she says. "Girls are committing more crimes in general, and more violent crimes in particular. They're beginning to behave like men."

Yet, not only do criminal statistics show girls are committing less crime, they indicate that girls are being convicted for less serious offences. According to Home Office statistics, the number of girls convicted of violent offences was nearly a quarter of the total sentenced in 1993. By the year 2000, this proportion had fallen to below 15%.

England and Wales are now top of the league in western Europe – on a par with Portugal – for the number imprisoned per head of population, and the increasing trend towards prosecution has had a greater impact on female offenders. Twice as many women as men are now jailed for a first-time offence, although most women offenders pose a low risk to the public; the commonest crimes for which both girls and women are convicted are theft, handling stolen goods, fraud and forgery – although the number of females convicted of drug offences has been rising steadily.

The long sentences handed out to teenage girls and foreign-national women bringing drugs into this country has been criticised heavily by those working for prison reform. They describe couriers as "cheap and expendable scapegoats" in the ideological battle over who is to blame for drug abuse and how the war against drugs should be fought. "It is very difficult to see how a very long sentence will do anything but reduce a young person's ability to make any future contribution to society," says Juliet Lyon. "It will not act as a deterrent. Getting caught is deterrent enough. Once a courier is caught, they are of no further use to a drug dealer."

The experiences of two girls at Bullwood Hall for importing drugs reveals a depressingly familiar pattern. They had accepted £5,000 in cash and a free holiday in Jamaica in return for bringing back what they say they were told would be a "small quantity" of drugs. Both had their passports and tickets taken from them in Jamaica and were only given them back once they were about to board the plane home. "I had no money, no job. It was coming up to Christmas. My mum kept kicking me out and my dad was on heroin. I was handed all this cash. I decided to risk it," says Charlie, now 18, who was sentenced to 18 months for importing 44 kilos of cannabis.

"I was naive. I was told I'd have to bring back a few cigarette cartons of cannabis. I didn't know they'd sealed 2½ kilos of cocaine inside the lining of my bag," says Vera Cardoso Matos, 18, who started an 8½-year sentence when she was 16.

The government recently announced it will spend £400m by 2003-04 on setting up a national treatment centre for drug addicts. This follows research that shows £1 spent on treatment saves £3 in criminal-justice costs. But this has deflected little criticism that, despite a promise to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime", Tony Blair has paid far more attention to the former.

The problems faced by girls in prison may seem minor compared with the national crisis of prison overcrowding. But many of the reasons prison won't work for them mirror the reasons it won't work for others. For the girls featured here and the hundreds more who have passed through prison gates and will continue to do so, time spent

**'MAGISTRATES THINK PRISON IS THE ANSWER. BUT IT'S NOT'**
**AN OFFICER AT HOLLOWAY PRISON**

behind bars is likely to store up untold trouble for them and for the rest of society. "What does it say about us as a country that we are warehousing children through prisons?" says Paul Cavadino, chief executive of the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders. "We use custody for juvenile girls to a greater extent than any other western European country. We not only use it more, but we use the most inappropriate form of detention – that within the prison system. If this is to change, it will need a very high-profile speech by the home secretary to make it do so."

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

I leave you with a snapshot of one typical night on D-Zero wing at Holloway prison, where the cells of all juveniles and young offenders – those on remand and those waiting to be transferred – are situated. Is this how we, as a civilised society, want the wheels of justice to turn in our name?

The noise and smell hit you first. D-Zero wing is at the bottom of one of the prison's multistorey modern blocks, originally built as a mental hospital. It is directly below the detox wing, where prisoners are suffering symptoms of withdrawal. The sound of women banging their cell windows and screaming in frustration is constant. The ground outside is littered with chicken bones, empty food cartons, burnt paper and tampons. Because of a lack of staff – the quota of 252 is 60 short – inmates are locked up most of the time, and throw stuff out of the window so that they are not stuck with the smell of it. On the night I visit, a serial arsonist on one of the wings above sets fire to her bed and other furniture at regular intervals, and a mentally disturbed woman sits smearing herself with excrement.

On this night in mid-June, there are 35 under-21s on D-Zero, including two 16-years-olds, one of whom is pregnant, and five girls aged 17. Another 17-year-old, pregnant with twins, has been taken to the health-care wing. Five juveniles have been placed on suicide watch.

"Many of the girls who come in here are very scared," says the officer who works in the reception area. "Their eyes are wide. They keep very quiet. They have seen the TV programme Bad Girls and think everyone in here is going to be very hard. They try to make themselves disappear into the woodwork."

Their fears are based in reality. Three months ago, a new senior management team was moved in after allegations that Holloway was being run by a clique of lesbian warders, known as the Magnificent Seven, who cultivated a culture of bullying and intimidation. After passing through reception, all new prisoners are strip-searched. Their possessions are sealed into transparent plastic bags. They are given a meal and are seen by volunteer workers, who try to help contact their families. It is not uncommon, these volunteers say, for mothers, not expecting custodial sentences, to arrive at Holloway after telling their children that morning they will see them after school.

On the wing is 17-year-old Michelle from Tottenham, who has been held on remand for a week on two counts of burglary. She'd been in a local-authority secure unit, but ran away. When she was rearrested, the week after her 17th birthday, the judge, she says, told her she was "old enough to go to prison". Michelle says she has been addicted to crack cocaine for two years. She was arrested by police, she says, after breaking into a house to smoke a pipe of crack. It is the first time she has been accused of a criminal offence, she says, though she admits to having once been cautioned for shoplifting. Michelle has long, wavy light-brown hair and seven plastic crucifixes round her neck, one of which she keeps chewing. She has been collecting them from the prison chapel, she says, to give to her nieces and nephews as souvenirs. She is not expecting a prison sentence. "I think they'll put me into rehab." But prison officers on D-Zero are not so sure.

"Magistrates have gone power-crazy," said one officer. "They are dishing out custodial sentences like never before. I've worked here for 13 years, and I've noticed a dramatic shift over the last five years. Girls are being sent here for offences that would never have led to a jail sentence before. A lot are first-time offenders. Magistrates think prison is the answer. It's not. Sending a 15-, 16- or 17-year-old to prison is just going to teach them more tricks of the trade. They shouldn't be here."

Michelle says she has "been with social services" since she was very young. "My mum's got a drink problem. I was kicked out of school when I was 14." What did she want to do when she was older? "I always wanted to work in customs at an airport, though I don't suppose I'd be allowed to now. I like to watch planes taking off, flying away." Had she ever been abroad? "Yes, I've been to Lapland," she says, proudly. "I was taken there when I was 10 by the NSPCC." ■

*Some of the names in this article have been changed*