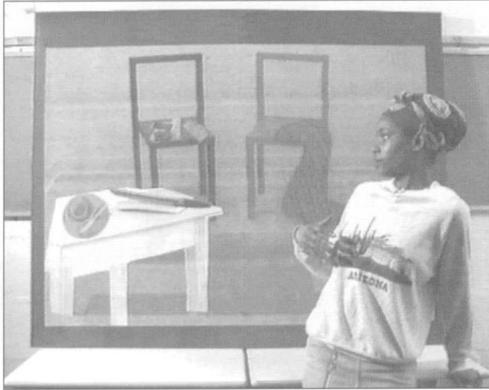


## WORK FROM THE TAKE FIVE PROJECT



### **Communal Poem Styal Prison**

*Two loaves on a breadboard  
sitting it out  
Waiting to cool down  
Feeling the crust squeeze*

*Destined to be eaten  
and cut with a knife  
Swallowed in one big wallop  
what a bleep bleep rotten life*

### **Communal Poem 2**

*My vein was large, the pin was sharp  
If I really had the nerve I'd put it straight in my heart  
But I'm a coward, my hand won't strike  
I pierced the vein with my spike  
I wondered if I'd last the night  
Who cares if I don't, it's the end of my fight.*



*I sit inside this body and look out from this head.  
I look at life around me and wonder if I'm dead.  
I sit inside this body and look out from this head.  
I look at life around me and wonder if I'm dead.  
Can it see where I'm going? Can it remember where I've  
been?  
I talk of what I'm doing and everything I've seen.  
Remember all the good times, forgetting all the bad.  
I wonder why I'm here, and all the laughs I've had,  
but I'll just keep on living, as there's nothing else inside,  
and perhaps, way in the future, things may even work out  
right.*

**Y**oung women in prison custody make up a tiny proportion of the prison population. During the course of each year around 300 girls aged 15, 16 and 17 are held in adult prisons, although at any one time the numbers will be many fewer than this. Because they are such a small proportion of the prison population they are not a priority for prison administrators, and they have remained largely invisible to researchers and to policy makers. The Woolf Report, the most important and influential inquiry into prison conditions for well over a decade (Woolf, 1991), made no mention of females. Research about female prisoners has

# Lost inside

**Barbara Hudson** reports on the Howard League investigation into the imprisonment of teenage girls.

generally been about adult females; research on young women has focused on their experiences in care and under supervision rather than in prison. While criminal statistics reveal an increase in the number of girls being sent to prison (numbers increased by 175 per cent between 1992 and 1996), little seems to be known about these girls.

However small the numbers might be, these young women should receive urgent attention because their presence in adult jails is in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Some of the conditions they meet in prisons also sit uneasily with the fact that they are 'children' under the Children Act 1989, statutorily requiring protection from harm. The Howard League's investigation into the use of prison custody for young women under the age of 18 is therefore timely and important.

The inquiry team comprised

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Fran Russell, legal policy officer for the Howard League, backed by an advisory group of specialists in the field. Members of the inquiry team visited all nine prisons holding girls aged under 18, between February and April, 1997; interviews were held with young women themselves, with prison governors and officers, and with other professionals working in the prisons. The inquiry covered the girls themselves, their life histories and their offences; the conditions and regimes in the prisons, and particular problems such as self-harm, drug-taking, bullying and racism. It produced a list of recommendations, principal among which is that where young women under 18 present a danger to themselves or to members of the public such that they need to be held in secure conditions, this should be local authority secure accommodation rather than in a prison establishment.

### The young women

Over the past couple of years a considerable amount of media attention has been given to a supposed increase in female predatory violence. This appears to have been prompted by the 'mugging' of the actress Elizabeth Hurley by a group of young women, and culminated in a BBC *Panorama* programme about the new breed of violent young women. The reality remains that predatory violent crime by females is relatively rare; the latest *British Crime Survey* reports that 95 per cent of victims of mugging identified their attackers as all male group, 3 per cent as mixed sex groups, and only 2 per cent as female groups (Mirlees-Black, Mayhew and Percy, 1996: 65).



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The inquiry sought to interview all the girls who were held in a prison on the day(s) of the visit. This resulted in 61 interviews; 74 were held in prisons at the time of the visits, but some were unavailable because of court appearances, visits or other appointments. 50 of these 61 girls were convicted and 11 were being held on remand. Among those convicted, 25 (50 per cent) had been convicted of violent offences, and 21 (42 per cent) had been convicted of non-violent offences such as theft and shoplifting; among those on remand, 7 (63 per cent) were charged with non-violent offences and 4 (37 per cent) with violent offences.

Two of the girls had been convicted of murder, but neither of these represents the stereotype of the sadistically violent teenager preying upon strangers. One of the girls had been subjected to years of systematic abuse by her mother and the victim; and there was considerable doubt over the mental well-being of the other. Of the other girls convicted of violent offences, most cases were linked to bullying, or quarrels between former friends. Violence accompanying theft or robbery was rare, and the inquiry found no evidence that girls are becoming more frequently involved in random, gratuitous violent attacks.

Prison staff told the inquiry team that most of the girls who come into prison had:

- suffered some form of sexual, physical or emotional abuse in their young lives;
- experienced poor relationships with their parents;
- experienced the loss of a parent either through death or separation;



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- experience of local authority care;
- abused drugs and alcohol;
- turned to prostitution to finance drug and alcohol habits;
- been excluded from school or been long-term truants.

The investigation thus suggests that among female teenager offenders, as well as among adult women, those who are imprisoned tend to be the most troubled and disadvantaged, rather than necessarily the most criminal.

### The prisons

These troubled young women meet entirely inappropriate conditions inside the prisons. Whilst the team found some prisons to be better than others (or, less worse!), none of them provided the facilities that would be needed to help the girls with any of the problems that they had been experiencing at the time of their offending. Prisons' focus on order and control makes the response to problems such as drug-taking, self-harm, bullying and emotional outbursts one of discipline and reaction to incidents, rather than help. For example, mandatory drug-testing is more general than the availability of counselling, or of medical and other assistance when de-toxing. In every prison visited, mandatory drug testing was also linked to a shift from taking cannabis to taking opiates (usually heroin), because cannabis is detectable in the body for 27 days longer than opiates, and so its use is more likely to be discovered and lead to punishment in the form of extra days added to the sentence. Bullying by older women was often linked to the entry of drugs

into the prison through drug drops outside the perimeter fence, with girls being recruited to recover the drugs; young women who before imprisonment may have had little experience of any drugs harder than cannabis or ecstasy may suddenly be exposed to an environment where hard drugs are the norm.

Self-harm was similarly responded to reactively, with girls telling of being rushed to the medical centre after an incident. For the vast majority of girls interviewed, imprisonment was the first occasion on which they had encountered self-harm, and staff confirmed that it was rare that a 15, 16 or 17 year old would come in already self-harming. Self-harm is to a great extent an imitative behaviour, seen as giving some control over their own bodies if not their own lives, and sometimes as a way of fitting into the institutional culture. The reactive response also provides an inducement to self-harm, as behaviour which will gain attention and removal to another environment.

It has been maintained by officials that older women will 'mother' the girls, although the reality has been that whilst some girls found genuine support in the company of older women, they are also likely to be pulled further into criminality, into drug-taking, and sometimes to a perpetuation of the physical and sexual abuse that they have experienced prior to their incarceration.

### Sentence planning, education & training

Although every sentenced prisoner under the age of 21 is allocated a

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personal officer who should prepare a sentence plan for that prisoner, the system was less than effective because of a combination of lack of specialist training in dealing with young people; overcrowding and understaffing; and shortness of stay. Staff reported that they had no time specifically set aside for this work, and that problems of order and control always took priority. Over half of the girls said that they had hardly any contact with their personal officer or that it was sporadic; a third did not know who their personal officer was.

14 of the girls interviewed (28 per cent) were serving sentences of six-and-a-half months or less, which means just over 3 months of time actually spent in prison. Girls serving longer terms would often move around between different establishments, so that their stay in any one establishment might be of only a few months' duration. As well as presenting difficulties in establishing relationships with personal officers, these short stays often meant that places on behavioural courses such as anger management or offending behaviour, as well as on educational courses, were not available to them. Education departments in the prisons offered some GNVQ courses but not GCSEs, and therefore relied on co-

operation from schools or colleges young women were attending prior to conviction to provide study material to prepare for examinations. Sometimes, lack of facilities means that material has to be studied within the cell. Prison education officers and governors were well aware of these deficiencies, but did not have the resources to remedy them.

### Conclusions

This short article has only been able to highlight some of the problems and issues raised by the inquiry, and has concentrated on those which are most specific to the imprisonment of girls aged under 18. Their youth sometimes constitutes a problem of itself, when 'normal' teenage behaviour such as playing music loudly, 'fooling about', or adolescent temper tantrums, might lead to extra days to be served, or even to placement within a segregation unit.

Ten of the young women (16 per cent) interviewed were black, mirroring the over-representation in the adult prison population. Young black women complained about being isolated, being subject to racist abuse, and they also complained that needs such as different food and hair products were not respected or catered for. These problems were exacerbated



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if they were moved from an inner city prison such as Holloway to a prison in the country, where there might be only one or two black or Asian young prisoners.

These young women were being held in damaging conditions, in institutions where regimes were geared to the control of adult women, rather than to the help and rehabilitation of teenage girls. What was striking was that the most caring, trained and specialised prison officers were the most critical of the regimes they were themselves delivering and almost none of the officials interviewed thought that the girls should be in their prisons. Ninety-nine per cent of girls sentenced to custody are sentenced to detention in a Young Offender Institution, but since no Young Offender Institutions solely designated for girls exist, they are held in adult jails partly designated as YOIs. The very small number who are sentenced for more serious offences under Section 53 of the Children and Young Persons' Act can be held in either a prison or a secure unit, and their committal to prison can therefore be because of a shortage of local authority secure unit accommodation.

Even in the present punitive sentencing climate, however, the number of young women who are judged to be too blameworthy or dangerous to society to be punished in the community, is so small that it is not practicable to provide separate penal institutions which could provide specialist facilities and also be located within reasonable travelling distance of all the girls' local communities. Establishing Young Offender Institutions solely for young women, equivalent to YOIs for young men, would therefore not be

a sensible solution to the problem.

The case for abolishing penal custody for all under 18-year olds is strong, and the Howard League would not argue that it should be abolished for girls, but continue for boys. All people under the age of 18 who need to be held in secure conditions should be held in local authority secure accommodation rather than in prisons. However, these girls are so few that their transfer to secure accommodation could be achieved with much less difficulty than could that of young men under the age of 18. The use of prison custody for all young people under 18 should end very speedily; for girls it should cease immediately.

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*Lost Inside - the imprisonment of teenage girls*, report of the Howard League Inquiry into the use of Prison Custody for Girls aged under 18, is available price £10 from the Howard League for Penal Reform, 708 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

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