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Crime and illness

Natasha Cornett, 26 (below), will spend her life at the Tennessee Prison for Women. Christa Pike, 29 (right) is sentenced to be executed there. Both committed murder at age 18. Both are bipolar

Too Young to Kill

They were teenagers when they committed unimaginably horrendous murders—crimes that made you wonder if they were monsters. What do you do with these kids? Lock them up and throw away the key? Try to rehabilitate them? Investigative reporter **JAN GOODWIN** discovers, first, that their crimes could have been prevented... and, second, that what's happening to them is another kind of murder.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIAN WITKIN





Christa Pike shuffles into the visitors room at the Tennessee Prison for Women, her leg shackles chained to her handcuffs, making it difficult to walk. Meeting her for the first time, I find it hard to picture this engaging young woman, with her halo of dark curls and ready smile, having any part in the barbaric crime she committed ten years ago, when she was only 18.

Her victim, 19-year-old Colleen Slemmer, was, like Christa, a student in the Job Corps—a government vocational-training program for disadvantaged kids. (Christa was studying to be a nurse.) The trouble started one January evening after the two had been fighting over what Christa says was Colleen's interest in her boyfriend, Tadarly Shipp. Around 8 P.M. Christa, along with Tadarly and another girl, lured Colleen to a deserted park and started slashing her with a box cutter. The raging, out-of-control attack lasted 30 to 60 minutes and ended only when Christa killed Colleen by repeatedly smashing a rock into her head. There were so many wounds on the body, the medical examiner stopped counting.

Perhaps it was the piece of Colleen's skull recovered from Christa's jacket that pushed the jury past mercy. In March 1996, they sentenced her to the electric chair. She became the youngest woman on death row.

In Greene County, Tennessee, an 18-year-old girl was allegedly the ringleader of six kids who slaughtered a couple and their young daughter as the family was coming home from a religious conference.

In Pearl, Mississippi, a 16-year-old boy went on a killing spree that started with his dog and ended in a shootout that left two classmates dead, seven wounded, and his own mother a bloody, beaten corpse.

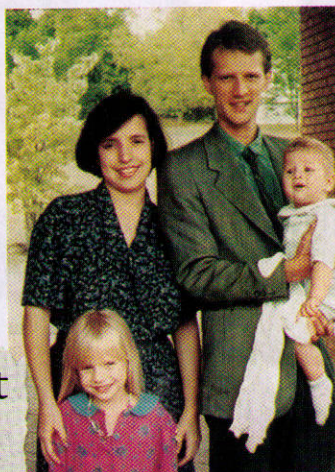
Even hardened New Yorkers were shaken in 1997 by "the baby-faced butcher," just 15 when she stabbed a drinking buddy in Central Park and gutted his body before dumping it in a lake.

Are these children evil? Are they the products of terrible parenting, drug abuse, a hyperviolent culture? And how should we deal with them? It's disturbing to learn that

some of them are out on the street after only a few years behind bars. It's also distressing to think that someone like Christa Pike, at just 18, could face execution.

In search of answers, I visited prisons around the country to find out who these young killers are and spoke to a wide range of professionals involved in their care. What I found

Delfina and Vidar Lillelid, 28 and 34 (right), and their daughter, Tabitha, 6, never made it home on April 6, 1997. At a rest stop, they were abducted and shot by Natasha Cornett (below) and her buddies. Only Peter, age 2, was left alive—barely.



Rest Stop Killing Suspect Claims She's Antichrist



opened my eyes—and, perhaps more unexpectedly, my heart.

SEAN PICA COMES ACROSS AS AN ARTICULATE, thoughtful man, working for his second master's degree, in urban theology, while volunteering at the New York City Public Housing Resident Alliance, a nonprofit organization in Harlem. Now 36, he spent almost half his life in jail for a crime he committed at 16. The son of a nurse and a police officer, Sean, a former Boy Scout, was stunned when classmate Cheryl Pierson confided that her father was sexually abusing her and now she was beginning to fear for her 8-year-old sister.

"Out of shame, Cheryl didn't want anyone else to know," says Sean, who grew up on Long Island. "She couldn't tell her

mother, who was dying of cancer. She just said she wanted her father dead. When her brother wouldn't do it, my response was 'I will help you.' I was torn between bringing in my father and not going against her wishes.

"I knew it was wrong to kill, but I thought I'd be doing it for the right reason," he says. "One day I woke up before dawn, walked to Cheryl's home, and waited outside until her father came out for work. Then, with a gun I bought off another kid, I just walked up and shot him in the head. When I left, I was in shock. Afterward Cheryl and I met up at a shopping mall. She looked as torn up as I was. But we were both naive enough to believe that

this would be the end of the problem." Sean served 16 years of an 8-to-24-year sentence; Cheryl served three and a half months.

If Sean's inability to imagine the consequences of his actions is hard to believe, it's strongly backed by new science about the teenage mind. Contradicting long-held theories that the brain is fully developed by age 14, a review of recent research by the National Institute of Mental Health shows that the frontal lobe, which regulates impulse control and reasoning, is not completely mature until the early 20s. This is one of the reasons why many teens are erratic drivers and why, some experts argue, children should be held less accountable for their crimes than adults.

"Kids' crimes tend not to be premeditated or well thought out," says Laurence Steinberg, PhD, director of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, which oversees the nation's largest ongoing follow-up study of kids who have committed serious felonies. "The murders are often robberies that go awry." Such reasoning was taken into account by the Supreme Court in its decision in March to abolish the death penalty for offenders who commit crimes while under the age of 18 (the case at hand concerned Christopher Simmons, who at 17 kidnapped and killed a woman he'd intended to rob). But roughly 200,000 juveniles are tried each year as adults, even

though many of them are too immature to understand the process or to effectively participate in their defense. And, many professionals agree, once behind bars, kids must survive such harsh conditions that they often become even more dangerous to society than they were when they went in.

The success of a boy like Sean Pica, who managed to earn his BA and a master's degree while at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, is an anomaly. Most juvenile inmates receive no education. Nor do they get adequate, if any, psychological counseling or medical treatment—a point that underscores the most wrenching aspect of child violence. Of the estimated two million people incarcerated in the United States, one in six is seriously affected by bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, according to E. Fuller Torrey, MD, president of the national nonprofit Treatment Advocacy Center and associate director for laboratory research at the Stanley Medical Research Institute, which supports studies on both diseases. Sadly, when you look closely into the cases

of teen killers, not only are their brains immature but a large number are mentally ill, their brutal acts committed because they've gone undiagnosed or without proper treatment and have lost, in some fundamental way, the ability to control themselves.

Christa Pike was diagnosed with bipolar disorder only after being locked up, although the signs were apparent throughout her teen years. If anyone noticed her odd behavior, they probably attributed it to an abusive home life. Alcoholism was a major problem in her family. She was raped twice as a child. When her grandmother, with whom she lived for a number of years—the sole family member to love her, she felt—died of cancer, Christa tried to kill herself. She was 12 years old. That's when her symptoms began, she says. Despite the suicide attempt, Christa received no treatment.

We're talking in a small visitors room at the prison, where a male guard watches her every movement. "I'd be really hyper, agitated, and irritated by the least little thing...so angry and impatient," she says. "I'd get into fights all the time; many kids at school were scared of me. I'd be unable to

sleep for days. Then I'd get really depressed and sleep continually. It was the same with food. Either I couldn't get enough and I'd eat everything in the house, or I didn't eat at all. I'm on meds now. They've changed my entire life. I still get depressed. I still get manic at times, but it's not as severe and not as often."

The drugs are a lifeline for Christa. When she was taken off them for a month because of a competency hearing in 2001, her bipolar disorder rapidly spun out of control again. During this forced relapse, she attacked a fellow inmate and nearly succeeded in strangling her. In the trial for that assault, Christa was found guilty of attempted murder, for which she got 25 years—a moot sentence for someone who has already received the death penalty. (Because Christa was 18 when she killed Colleen, her case won't be affected by the recent Supreme Court decision.)

Her original execution date was set for August 19, 2002, after she'd dropped her appeal. "I couldn't live like this anymore in maximum security," she says. "I've been in solitary confinement for the last eight years. That means locked down for 23 hours a day, 24 on weekends,



A newspaper headline (below) reports on Christa Pike's ambivalence about her execution. Colleen Slemmer (left) is the 19-year-old girl she killed.

Torn Between Fighting for Life, Embracing Death

in a cell about eight by nine feet. I'm always alone, even when I'm allowed out to exercise in the cage." That one precious hour isn't guaranteed, however, because it depends on whether there are guards free to take her. And with budget cutbacks, guards are often in short supply.

"The worst part is the lack of basic human contact," she says, "to be able to hug somebody and feel human. The touch of another person...you don't realize how much you need it until it's gone. Living like I do...if being executed was the only option I had, then that's what I was going to take. Call it state-assisted suicide."

But choosing to die isn't easy. Christa

changed her mind, asking to resume her appeal, and her 2002 execution date was stayed. Even so, as she continues to fight her sentence, she expects to be put to death. The question is when.

Most mentally ill people, it should be emphasized, are not dangerous, much less vicious killers. About half of bipolar patients, however, will develop psychotic symptoms at some point during their illness, which could lead to violent behavior if untreated, says Torrey. "This is more likely to happen when they are manic. While patients can display psychotic features during the depressive stage, the tendency then is to be self-damaging or to commit suicide." A mixed-state phase, during which a bipolar sufferer rapidly cycles between mania and depression, often several times a day, is also a period when psychosis can occur. "It's like having a ferocious wolf trapped inside your body" is how one 16-year-old girl described it.

Bipolar disorder in children—about a million may be affected—was not recognized in the medical literature until a decade ago, which may partly explain why so many adolescents with the disease are erroneously labeled hyperactive or depressed. Unfortunately, misdiagnoses can be catastrophic. The drugs used for both hyperactivity and depression can push bipolar patients into full-blown psychosis.

The correct drugs, if taken (bipolar patients are notorious for going off their meds), work very successfully, says Torrey. "We have so many more choices

of medications now than we did ten to twenty years ago. And while some patients are treatment resistant, most will respond at least partially and many will go into complete remission. It's a matter of finding the right drug combination."

Natasha Wallen Corne is one kid who certainly could have used some help. Diagnosed as bipolar when she was 14, she struggled to contain her demons, threatening constantly of suicide for the next few years. The climax of her steady progression toward disaster finally occurred in April 1997 when, at 18, *CONTINUED ON PAGE*

she was arrested with five other youths in the gruesome murder of Delfina and Vidar Lillelid, a young couple they happened to meet at a Tennessee rest stop off Interstate 81. Along with the Lillelids, who were on their way home from a Jehovah's Witness gathering, Natasha and her accomplices also killed their 6-year-old daughter and left their 2-year-old son for dead, shot right through the eye.

Looking at Natasha's life, her violent trajectory isn't surprising. At age 10, things started going noticeably wrong after her mother tried to kill herself by swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills. Natasha was the one who found her, and soon she'd stopped eating, often for days, sometimes a week at a time. The same year, she began slashing herself with razor blades, first her ankles, then her forearms. In eighth grade, she was committed to Charter Ridge Hospital, a psychiatric facility in Lexington, where she was found to be anorexic—and bipolar, just like her mother. Natasha's medical report stated that she "has threatened suicide, has threatened to assault mother, throws objects at wall, [and is] observed to be very moody, irritable, argumentative."

Natasha didn't want to leave Charter Ridge; she felt safe there. But her Medicaid insurance wouldn't cover more than 11 days. One of the physicians advised placing her in a private residential facility, which can run \$70,000 to \$125,000 a year. To Natasha's mother, Madonna, desperate to help her daughter but living on \$515 a month disability and barely able to afford enough food for the two of them, the suggestion seemed nothing short of callous. (In much of the country, to obtain such residential treatment, parents are forced to turn over custody of their child to the state—although frequently there are no facilities with openings.) Although doctors at Charter Ridge concluded that Natasha was a "danger to [her]self or others," once the insurance ran out, she was discharged, forced back into a world that, for good reason, she found both frightening and painful.

Natasha tried for months to check in with a therapist, as the doctors had recommended. But the counselor repeatedly canceled or postponed appointments, a

common problem for Medicaid patients. While she was at Charter Ridge, the doctors had prescribed lithium, the medication of choice for bipolar disorder and a drug that needs close monitoring because it can affect kidney and thyroid function. But no physician followed up to see if she was taking it, nor did any doctor discover that the drug—useless in a third of bipolar patients—wasn't working for her.

As her moods began to cycle chaotically, the 16-year-old girl who once got perfect grades started failing every subject. When another girl bullied her, she turned to the principal for help but says he just called her a weirdo and suggested she transfer to another school. "He pretty much said I deserved what she was doing because I was a freak."

Today Natasha and the other five offenders are each serving three life sentences without parole plus 25 years: one life sentence for each of the lives they took, and 25 years for the child they maimed. Of the six young people who committed the awful crime, four are bipolar.

IN THIS COUNTRY, MENTAL ILLNESS as a criminal defense is virtually impossible to prove. Even in cases of severely afflicted individuals, an insanity plea is rarely successfully employed. Legal insanity is determined in more than half of U.S. states by the M'Naughten Rule, a primitive standard dating back to 1843, which requires that an individual not be able to tell the difference between right and wrong. But when John Hinckley was acquitted by reason of insanity in the shooting of President Reagan, more than 30 states toughened their statutes governing this defense. According to an eight-state study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, it is utilized in just 1 percent of all felony cases, and out of those, succeeds a mere quarter of the time.

For bipolar patients, whose disease is cyclical, mental impairment is particularly hard to prove. Sufferers may commit a crime while psychotically manic but appear in court many months later when the mania has passed or they have been stabilized on medication. Other illnesses, including schizophrenia, can also wax and wane.

Requests for psychological evaluations in cases involving children are often

denied, "typically because of the money involved," says Kathleen Heide, PhD, a criminology professor at the University of South Florida. In 1997, for example, a judge refused to grant a psychological evaluation to Luke Woodham, despite clear signs that the boy was unstable enough to warrant one. Luke, at age 16, had tortured his dog to death, then killed his mother and two students at his school in Pearl, Mississippi. At the time, he wrote a letter stating, "I am not insane! I am angry." His words were taken at face value in court. He was found evil, not ill, and sentenced to three life sentences.

In prison Luke was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, which can cause depression, rage, and impulsive aggression. Now 24, he is receiving no treatment. "I'm going to be in solitary confinement until I die," he says.

In Florida, Michael Hernandez was arrested last year one day after his 14th birthday when he fatally stabbed a close friend, Jaime Gough, in the school restroom. Reports surfaced that shortly before the murder Michael, a gifted kid who collected Bibles and wanted to become a psychologist, was beginning to display symptoms of what is probably schizophrenia—compulsively making lists and writing to himself in a journal, "You will be a serial killer and mass murderer. Stay alone. Never forget God, ever." But the prosecutor dismissed the possibility of mental illness. "We see nothing wrong with this defendant," she said, although the boy had not been evaluated by a psychiatrist.

AS THE MENTAL HEALTHCARE FACILITIES in this country dwindle and restrictions on treatment by insurance companies increase, more and more of the mentally ill are being warehoused in prisons. Last year a damning report commissioned by Congressman Henry Waxman and Senator Susan Collins documented how thousands of children, some as young as 7 and many without a single charge against them, were being held in juvenile detention centers solely because they'd been awaiting mental healthcare services. "I can't imagine a more inappropriate place for a child with serious mental illness," says Karen Lightfoot, Waxman's spokesperson.

A recent investigation of the California

delusional disorder that reportedly made John Hinckley Jr. shoot President Reagan in an attempt to please Jodie Foster. Dietz recently made big news again, when the verdict against Andrea Yates, the Texas woman who drowned her five children, was overturned because of the doctor's false testimony. Yates's lawyers had pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, which they said was brought on by postpartum depression. But Dietz testified for the prosecution that he had consulted on a *Law & Order* episode in which a mother killed her children and got off with the same plea. Yates, a fan of the show, must have premeditated the murders, the prosecution argued. The jury sentenced Yates to life in prison. As it turned out, there was no such episode. Dietz called it "an honest mistake," but it looked as if he was behaving rather cavalierly with people's lives.

Hill called Dietz years after the Thomas hearings, hoping to understand why a respected professional abetted the suggestion that she could have such a rare disorder without knowing her or speaking to her. Had any Republican asked him what the symptoms suffered by a victim of sexual harassment would be? she asked. No, he said; nor had anyone questioned him on how to distinguish between someone in the sway of a delusion and a person who had actually endured sexual harassment.

And then there is David Brock. His 1993 book, *The Real Anita Hill: The Untold Story*, was considered the ultimate proof for Thomas supporters that Hill was, in Brock's words, "a bit nutty, and a bit slutty." Long quotations from unidentified sources painted Hill as a woman who regularly watched pornography and preyed sexually on her students. Brock wrote that one source told him Hill sprinkled pubic hair through the pages of students' graded papers. Not only did Brock enjoy huge book sales and glowing reviews for his work, he went after journalists who disproved his allegations. Then in 2002, he published *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, in which he admitted to shoddy reporting in the Anita Hill book, "not only in the sources I had trusted but in the obvious fact that I had missed significant evidence that showed that Hill's testimony was more truthful than Thomas's flat denials after all. My version of the Thomas-Hill controversy

was wrong...." Brock attributes his errors to "ideological bias, and my misdirected quest for acceptance from a political movement." Amazingly, his Hill book is still sold without a disclaimer. Martha Levin, executive vice president and publisher of Free Press, says that since her arrival in 2001, the author has never requested the addition of new material to contextualize the work. Free Press, she adds, would not initiate such an addition because the book, as is, "is part of the historical record." Coincidentally, Levin edited Anita Hill's 1997 memoir, *Speaking Truth to Power*, when she was at Doubleday.

If time has allowed some truths to come out, the revelations also expose how lonely it must have been for Hill when the

Do You Have a Case?

If you believe you are a victim of sexual harassment at work and want to share your story, go to oprah.com/sexharass and follow the instructions. If your case qualifies, it may be selected by a law firm for pro bono representation and featured in *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

public humiliation was new. "Even today, as cynically as I look back on that period, I don't know how deep the corruption was and maybe never will," she says. "But you know these things have a way of surfacing—even if I don't do anything, if I just sit back and wait. And I plan to live to be a very old woman."

SINCE THE HILL HEARINGS, SEXUAL harassment and power dynamics in the office have made big news. During the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal—though their interaction fell into the area of consensual relations—Hill was deeply bothered by the potential damage to interns who didn't want to engage in that kind of behavior in order to get favor in the White House. She also believed it sent a bad message to the country about the role women are supposed to play. Still, she felt sympathy for Lewinsky, who was a decade younger than Hill had been, with no career to fall back on, when she faced

testifying and the resulting public scrutiny. "And she clearly had a very emotional attachment to the president. I did not have that burden," Hill says. "And so I was fortunate in that respect as well."

Hill can watch events like this from outside the fray, but her moment in the news may not be over yet. An appointment to the Supreme Court is for life, so Thomas's position is safe. With Chief Justice William Rehnquist possibly stepping down after the session ends in late June, however, court watchers wonder who might replace him. When previously asked about federal judicial appointments, Bush has said he would select judges like Thomas and Antonin Scalia, indicating a preference for such conservatives. That leads people to wonder whether Thomas might get the nod for chief justice. Hill would like to think that the president will not make that choice. "I think he realizes that he's going to have some battles and this one may not even be worth it," she says. "And I don't know that even Karl Rove is willing to take this one on." Still, Bush has proved himself disinterested in the notion of conserving political capital for a later date, and Thomas was his father's man.

The potential uproar that could sweep into Anita Hill's life again if she were forced to testify does not daunt her. She has created a happy existence, traveling the world, painting and drawing as a hobby. And she is now in a peaceful, enriching relationship with a Massachusetts businessman. Without motherhood in her plans, she has set up the Anita Hill Fund for the Murrah Daycare Center Survivors to help put through college the children who were in the federal building during the Oklahoma City bombing.

Hill has no desire to disturb the hard-won tranquillity it took her more than a decade to establish, but life has also made her less cautious about taking risks. "What are they going to do to me?" she says. "By the time somebody has called you a liar, a psychotic, and incompetent, there's not much left to hurl at you. Having survived all that, I'm not too worried about what else can be done. And I don't necessarily see the benefit in being guarded, because I was quite guarded before and it didn't help. That's really not a protection." Spoken like a true whistle-blower. ●