# Former UK cannabis smuggler warns of harsh foreign sentences facing young women abroad



In a poignant reflection on the perilous world of drug trafficking, Levi-April Whalley, who narrowly avoided incarceration after attempting to smuggle cannabis into the UK, has voiced her concerns for two other young women caught in similarly distressing circumstances. Bella May Culley and Charlotte May Lee are currently facing serious drug smuggling charges while detained in foreign prisons notorious for their appalling conditions. Whalley's insights offer a sobering perspective on the risks and realities of international drug smuggling.

Whalley, along with her companion, was arrested at Birmingham International Airport after their shopping trip to New York City in 2023. What began as a holiday marked by retail therapy quickly turned into a nightmare when customs officials discovered over 35 kilograms of cannabis concealed in their luggage, with a street value exceeding £160,000. Initially claiming their bags contained watches, Whalley’s facade shattered under scrutiny when text messages revealed a more sinister involvement in drug trafficking. The duo ultimately received 18-month suspended sentences, a fate markedly less severe than what Culley and Lee now face.

Culley, an 18-year-old nursing student, has drawn headlines for her alarming situation in Georgia, where she was apprehended while allegedly attempting to smuggle 14 kilograms of cannabis. Reports suggest that she has claimed to be pregnant, compounding the trauma of her situation while highlighting the precariousness of her legal standing, as she awaits trial in conditions described as "hellish". Meanwhile, Lee, a former air hostess, was arrested in Sri Lanka with two suitcases allegedly filled with synthetic cannabis valued at an astonishing £1.2 million. She faces a daunting prospect of a 20 to 25-year imprisonment.

Whalley's own experience of being apprehended at home resonates deeply with her perspective on the trials of these women. She acknowledges the potential for a harsher outcome had she been caught abroad, a sentiment echoed by many who understand the varying legal landscapes of drug offenses worldwide. "I believe if I was caught abroad it would have been a completely different outcome for myself,” she remarked, revealing the harrowing nature of being embroiled in the drug trade while far from home.

Having recently given birth, Whalley characterises her previous ordeal as a form of ongoing torture, compounded by the emotional weight of her actions. She sees herself and now Culley and Lee as victims, influenced by dire personal circumstances and the allure of a carefree lifestyle that masks the devastating consequences of drug trafficking. "I was just following what my friend was doing and influenced negatively without thinking of consequences due to where I was in my life then," she recounted, highlighting the vulnerabilities that can lead individuals into such dangerous paths.

Despite her leniency in sentencing, Whalley expresses a deep awareness of the repercussions of drug smuggling. She underscores the importance of recognising the realities surrounding such decisions, stating, "Just because I had a suspended sentence should not set a precedent for others to do it." This insight carries weight, particularly in light of recent declarations made by law enforcement regarding the extensive and collaborative efforts aimed at dismantling drug trafficking networks operating across national borders.

For Whalley, the ordeal serves as an urgent reminder about the dangers of unwitting involvement in drug smuggling. "If I had a chance to speak to Bella and Charlotte, I would tell them to just tell the truth and be honest," she advised, extending empathy towards the two women and acknowledging the shared humanity that binds their experiences together, despite the deep chasms separating their circumstances.

Whalley's call for honesty in a situation ripe with ambiguity adds a layer of hope to a story marked by despair. As police agencies continue their global crackdown on drug trafficking, the narrative of these young women serves as a stark warning about the consequences of naivety in a world driven by illicit activities. Their futures hang in the balance, echoing a wider societal dialogue about responsibility, vulnerability, and the relentless consequences of the choices made far from home.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170), [[2]](https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2024/04/23/new-haven-pharmacy-and-owner-agree-pay-120000-settle-controlled)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170), [[3]](https://richmond.com/news/5-arrested-in-state-henrico-investigation-of-new-york-drug-pipeline/article_2b865cd3-fd8a-58ab-a89c-5524ccd160b0.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170), [[2]](https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2024/04/23/new-haven-pharmacy-and-owner-agree-pay-120000-settle-controlled), [[4]](https://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle/1211/fulltext)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170), [[5]](https://www.borderlandbeat.com/2024/06/feds-takedown-sinaloa-cartel-network-in.html)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/glam-drug-mule-mums-warning-35302170> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2024/04/23/new-haven-pharmacy-and-owner-agree-pay-120000-settle-controlled> - In April 2024, Cornerstone Pharmacy, Inc. and its owner, Yong Kwon, agreed to pay $120,000 to settle allegations of violating the Controlled Substances Act. The DEA's investigation revealed that between September 2017 and June 2021, the pharmacy filled prescriptions for controlled substances issued without a legitimate medical purpose, including prescriptions to individuals displaying red flags of abuse and addiction. The DEA also found recordkeeping discrepancies for several controlled substances. As part of the settlement, Kwon voluntarily surrendered the pharmacy's DEA license, and Whalley Drug ceased operating as a retail pharmacy.
3. <https://richmond.com/news/5-arrested-in-state-henrico-investigation-of-new-york-drug-pipeline/article_2b865cd3-fd8a-58ab-a89c-5524ccd160b0.html> - A two-year investigation by Henrico Police and Virginia State Police led to the arrests of five individuals linked to a major drug pipeline from New York to the Richmond area. The investigation uncovered multiple shipments of hundreds of pounds of marijuana and kilograms of cocaine. The arrested individuals face charges including possession with intent to distribute and endangering the welfare of a child. The case highlights the extensive efforts by law enforcement to dismantle drug trafficking networks operating across state lines.
4. <https://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle/1211/fulltext> - In May 2024, the New York City Mayor's Office announced a crackdown on illicit marijuana dispensaries operating without licenses. The initiative aimed to shut down unlicensed shops and enforce regulations to protect consumers and ensure public safety. The move followed the legalization of recreational marijuana in New York in 2021, which led to a surge in unlicensed dispensaries. The city's efforts included increased inspections and legal actions against violators to curb the illicit market and promote the growth of the legal cannabis industry.
5. <https://www.borderlandbeat.com/2024/06/feds-takedown-sinaloa-cartel-network-in.html> - In June 2024, federal authorities dismantled a Sinaloa Cartel-linked fentanyl and methamphetamine distribution network operating in Imperial Valley, California. The operation, dubbed 'Operation Valley,' resulted in 36 arrests and the seizure of over 4 kilograms of fentanyl, more than 324 kilograms of methamphetamine, significant quantities of cocaine and heroin, and 52 firearms. Notably, U.S. Border Patrol Agent Alexander Grindley was arrested for trafficking methamphetamine while employed at Customs and Border Protection. The operation underscored the extensive reach of drug trafficking organizations and the collaborative efforts of law enforcement agencies to combat them.
6. <https://undercoverist.org/latest-arrests-across-the-u-k-14-03-2025-key-cases-and-summaries/> - In March 2025, a series of significant arrests were reported across the UK. In Morganton, North Carolina, six individuals were arrested following a multi-day police operation at a local motel, leading to the seizure of drugs and firearms. In Conway, South Carolina, a 39-year-old man was sentenced to three years in prison after being found guilty of trafficking 17 pounds of marijuana from Washington state to South Carolina. These cases highlight ongoing efforts by law enforcement agencies to combat drug trafficking and related criminal activities.
7. <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2024/dec/15/news-brief-Dec-2024/> - In December 2024, several notable incidents were reported within the U.S. prison system. In California, a convicted killer serving multiple sentences was brutally beaten to death by fellow inmates at Calipatria State Prison. In Florida, a detainee en route to Escambia County Jail was found hiding drugs in his waistband and charged with contraband smuggling. In Georgia, a state Department of Corrections guard was arrested for allegedly attempting to smuggle methamphetamine and tobacco into Lee State Prison. These incidents underscore ongoing challenges related to contraband smuggling and violence within correctional facilities.