

Jeffrey Epstein's Death Signaled a Call for Dramatic US Prison System Reform

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66-year-old Jeffrey Epstein died in a New York prison on August 10, 2019. Although his death was ruled a suicide, there were other reports deeming it a homicide. Entrenched in this article are the civil rights issues plaguing victims of sexual predators and sex traffickers. Epstein was previously given light sentences and a mere slap on the wrist, reflecting the unequal treatment of rich white men. This August incident also brings to light the inhumane prison conditions that many are forced to suffer through. Among other issues, Epstein's death inspired calls for dramatic reforms in the US prison system.

Epstein was arrested in New York on July 6, 2019 for sex trafficking. He denied any wrongdoing and plead not guilty to all charges. Epstein was denied bail and he was held in the New York Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) while awaiting trial. If convicted, Epstein would face a 45-year prison sentence.



Epstein was in the special housing unit at MCC and had been taken off suicide watch on July 30, 2019. Epstein was found dead in his prison cell on the morning of August 10,

2019. A noose was around his neck and he was unconscious. Although a New York City medical examiner ruled the death a suicide, a forensic pathologist found the injuries to be more consistent with a homicide.

On August 9, 2019, the night before Epstein's death, two federal prison guards were on duty in special housing unit wing. The guards were required to conduct a mandated inmate head count as well as conduct their regular rounds. Rounds were supposed to occur every 30 minutes. Hours of surveillance video revealed that neither guard conducted either task between the evening of August 9, 2019 and the following morning, an eight-hour period. Instead, they were found to be browsing the Internet and sleeping.

Tova Noel and Michael Thomas, the two guards, were federally prosecuted after they were accused of attempting to cover up their failure to check on Epstein in the hours before his death. They were charged with conspiracy and falsifying official records. The second charge comes out of the false certifications that were signed stating they had performed the mandated head count and performed rounds in the unit. Their trial is scheduled for April 20, 2020.

Following news of Epstein's prison death was a demand for criminal justice and prison reform. Judge Richard Berman wrote a letter to the New York times expressing his concern over US prison conditions and the need for reform. One of the largest issues plaguing federal prisons, including the New York prison which housed Epstein, is chronic understaffing. The shortage of staff at MCC is best reflected when Ms. Noel was scheduled to work a 16-hour double shift on August 9. Additionally, Mr. Thomas was working an overtime shift that evening and it was not his first overtime shift of the week.

Epstein's death also raised concerns regarding suicide rates in prison and the lack of mental health treatment. In 2014, the Bureau of Justice released statistics finding that four percent of deaths in federal prisons were due to suicide. 35 percent of deaths in local jails were due to suicide. A large portion of the psychological and physical harm issues in prisons stems from the overuse of solitary confinement. On October 28, 2019, the New York Civil Liberties Union released a new report demonstrating how common solitary confinement is used to punish people in New York state prisons. Correctional officers often have broad discretion to subject people to a 23-hour isolation in solitary confinement, the effects of which are devastating. The Human Alternatives to Solitary Confinement Act was introduced to eliminate long-term solitary confinement for thousands of people in New York City. The Act would limit the length of solitary

confinement sentences and would also limit those who can be held in solitary confinement.

The crimes Jeffrey Epstein committed were horrendous and his death took away his victims' opportunity for a day in court to seek some form of justice. Hopefully, out of all this bad, will come good; a massive reform of US prisons. The pressure is on the US Attorney General and those working in the US Bureau of Prisons to eradicate civil rights violations plaguing the incarcerated population.