

Jeffrey Epstein case exposes how US justice works for the rich

By Matthew Taylor
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The crimes and prosecution of billionaire money manager Jeffrey Epstein have received a great deal of attention in the past weeks from the news media. Most reports have centered upon the role of Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta, who, in his previous role as the top federal prosecutor in Miami at the time of Epstein's sentencing, had to sign off on the sweetheart deal he received.

Acosta claims the 13-month sentence Epstein received for two charges of soliciting prostitution was the harshest sentence that could be imposed, but reports from the *Miami Herald* and other sources have exposed this as a lie. Throughout the early 2000s, and probably earlier, Epstein sexually abused scores, perhaps hundreds of young girls, most of them between the ages of 13 and 16. He is also alleged to have engaged in human trafficking on a massive scale, pimping out his harem of desperate youth to his circle of financiers, politicians, and lawyers.

Throughout the investigation into his crimes, his prosecution, sentencing and jail term, and right up to the present day, Epstein has been aided by a pliant judiciary and multiple prosecutors who, because of his great wealth, treated him as though he were their client, rather than a serial sex offender. They helped Epstein and his legal team minimize public scrutiny of his case, worked diligently to substitute more serious charges with lesser ones, and ultimately violated federal law by failing to notify any of Epstein's victims of the plea agreement reached.

The investigation and prosecution of Epstein have illustrated a fundamental fact of modern life: there are two justice systems, one for the rich, and one for everybody else.

Epstein started his career in New York decades ago, working as a derivatives specialist for Bear Stearns before founding his own investment firm. The full extent of his wealth is unknown, and the *Miami Herald* has noted that he has never been listed in the *Forbes* 400 list of richest Americans "largely because the magazine has never been able to determine the source or the size of his wealth."

Though the exact figure is unknown, Epstein had the means to purchase, in addition to the Palm Beach mansion

and private airliner where he committed many of his crimes, a private island in the Caribbean, a 10,000-acre ranch in New Mexico, and a Manhattan mansion that occupies an entire block of New York City real estate, the largest private residence in that city.

From 1999 to 2005, investigators in the Palm Beach area established that Epstein had set up a network whereby he would pay young girls, recruited from high schools and shopping malls, \$200-\$300 to give him "massages" at his mansion. Then he would pressure them into sexual acts. He would then offer them money to recruit other girls, essentially building what investigators labeled a "sexual Ponzi scheme."

Typically Epstein and his network of "schedulers" would target poor working-class girls. His victims came from disadvantaged families, single-parent homes or foster care. Many of the girls were "one step away from homelessness," according to the *Herald*. One victim, age 14 when she met Epstein, told the newspaper, "Jeffrey preyed on girls who were in a bad way, girls who were basically homeless. He went after girls who he thought no one would listen to and he was right."

Throughout the course of their investigation, reporters "identified about 80 women who say they were molested or otherwise sexually abused by Epstein from 2001 to 2006."

Palm Beach police opened an investigation of Epstein in 2005 after the parents of one of his victims reported his activities. Over the course of several months, investigators identified approximately 35 victims. Upon hearing about the investigation from one of the girls the police had interviewed, Epstein unleashed a multi-million-dollar counteroffensive, beginning with retaining the services of his longtime friend, the notorious right-wing lawyer Alan Dershowitz.

Dershowitz hired a team of private investigators to interview his client's victims, dig up information he thought would discredit their stories, and intimidate them into keeping silent, sometimes by posing as police officers. He also met with Palm Beach County State's Attorney Barry

Krischer to discuss the case, after which both Krischer and lead prosecutor Assistant State Attorney Lanna Belohlavek began to obstruct the investigation.

After the State's Attorney's office refused to indict Epstein in 2006 on felony sex charges and instead referred his case to a grand jury that only heard testimony from two of his victims, Palm Beach Police Chief Michael Reiter publicly accused his superiors of obstructing the investigation and the prosecutor's office was forced to turn the investigation over to the FBI. Epstein was indicted on misdemeanor charges of soliciting prostitution.

After the federal investigation began Epstein, who was a longtime donor to the Democratic party and a personal friend of former president Bill Clinton, hired a small army of lawyers to represent him, most notably one-time Clinton special prosecutor Ken Starr.

Throughout the subsequent months, federal prosecutors worked hand in hand with Epstein's team to assure the billionaire would spend a minimal amount of time in prison, and that his case would be kept out of the public eye.

Emails obtained by the *Miami Herald* detail this collaboration. In one, lead prosecutor A. Marie Villafana wrote to Epstein's lawyers, "On an avoid the press note ... I can file the charge in district court in Miami which will hopefully cut the press coverage significantly. Do you want to check that out?"

In another email, Villafana details her efforts to minimize the charges against the man she was prosecuting: "I've been spending some quality time with Title 18 [the U.S. criminal code] looking for misdemeanors." Throughout this period, prosecutors often communicated with Epstein's attorneys via private emails, suggesting that they did not want public scrutiny of their negotiations.

After months of discussion, Epstein agreed to a plea deal whereby he would plead guilty to two state counts of soliciting prostitution and receive a 13-month sentence. In return, prosecutors agreed to shut down the investigation and grant immunity to Epstein's co-conspirators, who were unnamed in the deal. Prosecutors also agreed to conceal the plea agreement from Epstein's victims until after his sentencing, a violation of the federal Crime Victims Rights Act.

Included in the language of Epstein's plea agreement was an acknowledgment by prosecutors that Epstein had provided assistance in an unrelated case. There was media speculation that it may be related to an investigation of two Bear Stearns executives whom Epstein testified against. Epstein had been a major investor in that company prior to its collapse and absorption by JP Morgan Chase at the beginning of the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

Epstein's privileged status continued after his sentencing.

He was allowed to serve his sentence in a private wing of the Palm Beach County jail, rather than be sent to prison where his status as a sex offender might place him in danger. He was also granted work release for six days a week, 12 hours a day, in spite of the fact that under Florida law sex offenders are barred from that program. He paid the sheriff's deputies who guarded him and was generally given the VIP treatment by his jailers.

Upon his release, Epstein was to serve a year under house arrest. This he did, jetting back and forth between his mansions in New York and Palm Beach, with frequent excursions to his private island, all court-approved.

Epstein's special treatment continued for years after he completed his sentence. In 2011 he tried to get his sex offender status reduced in the state of New York. The federal prosecutor assigned to the case argued on Epstein's behalf, claiming that his victims had not cooperated in the case and that Epstein had never technically been indicted. The judge denied the petition expressing astonishment that a prosecutor would make such an argument.

Had Epstein not been a wealthy man, he would have surely served decades in prison for his crimes. Of course, were it not for his great wealth he would not have had the means to commit his crimes on such a vast scale to begin with. Because of the unique agreement he struck with prosecutors, the full extent of his sex trafficking network may never be known. It is only due to the exposé published by the *Miami Herald*, and the role of Trump's current Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta in his plea agreement, that the Epstein case has come to public attention.

Epstein still has legal difficulties. Multiple lawsuits have been filed by his victims to overturn his plea agreement. Whatever the outcome of these lawsuits may be, they will not negate the central truth that has been once again been exposed: in the United States there are two sets of laws, one for the masses of people, and a different one altogether for the wealthy, where their privileged status protects them from the consequences of even the most heinous and repulsive actions.

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