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Jeffrey Epstein Dead in Suicide at Jail, Spurring Inquiries

Mr. Epstein, the financier accused of sex trafficking, was not under suicide watch at the Manhattan jail at the time of his death.



By William K. Rashbaum, Benjamin Weiser and Michael Gold

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[The latest: Mr. Epstein was left alone and not closely monitored before his suicide.]

Jeffrey Epstein, the financier who was long dogged by accusations of sexual abuse of girls and who was able to cultivate an array of high-profile friends despite his lurid lifestyle, killed himself in his Manhattan jail cell, officials said on Saturday.

Mr. Epstein's death quickly reverberated from New York to Washington to Florida, spurring federal inquiries into why he was not being more closely monitored and angering his accusers, who said they had hoped to have his crimes aired in open court.

Mr. Epstein hanged himself, and was found at around 6:30 a.m. Saturday at the Metropolitan Correctional Center, officials said.

Last month, after being denied bail on federal sex trafficking charges, Mr. Epstein was found unconscious in his jail cell with marks on his neck. Prison officials had been investigating the incident as a possible suicide attempt.

Mr. Epstein was placed on suicide watch after the incident on July 23 and received a daily psychiatric evaluation, according to a person familiar with his detention. He was removed from suicide watch on July 29 and returned to the special housing unit, a segregated area of the prison with extra security, this person said.

The authorities did not immediately explain why he was taken off suicide watch. The F.B.I. said it was investigating, and Attorney General William P. Barr said in a statement that a special inquiry would be opened into what happened.

"I was appalled to learn that Jeffrey Epstein was found dead early this morning from an apparent suicide while in federal custody," Mr. Barr said. "Mr. Epstein's death raises serious questions that must be answered."

In addition to the F.B.I., the Inspector General, the Justice Department's internal watchdog, will open an investigation into Mr. Epstein's death, Mr. Barr said. The Metropolitan Correctional Center is run by the federal Bureau of Prisons.

[Read more: Why wasn't Mr. Epstein on suicide watch when he died?]

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan last month charged Mr. Epstein, 66, with sex trafficking of girls as young as 14 and sex trafficking conspiracy. The indictment renewed attention on how Mr. Epstein — who had opulent homes, a private jet and access to elite circles — had escaped severe punishment in an earlier investigation of sexual abuse more than a decade ago in Florida.

He had avoided federal criminal charges in 2008 after prosecutors brokered a widely criticized deal that allowed him to plead guilty to state charges of solicitation of prostitution from a minor and serve 13 months in jail. Even while in custody, Mr. Epstein was able to leave the jail for 12 hours a day, six days a week, to work at his office in Florida.

The new federal indictment also focused scrutiny on luminaries in government, politics, business, academia, science and fashion with whom Mr. Epstein had associated over the years, including Donald J. Trump, Bill Clinton, Prince Andrew of Britain and the retail billionaire Leslie H. Wexner.



The Southern District of New York announced charges against Jeffrey Epstein last month. Jefferson Siegel for The New York Times

Mr. Epstein's defense team — the lawyers Reid Weingarten, Marty Weinberg and Michael Miller — declined to comment on the circumstances of death. "We are enormously sorry to learn of today's news. No one should die in jail," they said in a statement.

A fourth member of Mr. Epstein's legal team, Marc Fernich, blamed a host of actors — from prosecutors to victims' lawyers to the media — for bearing "some responsibility for this calamity."

Mr. Epstein's suicide derailed a prosecution that his accusers had hoped would finally show how he had been allowed to commit what they said was a string of depraved crimes for so many years — and what role his wealth, privilege and connections played.

Jennifer Araoz, who said she had been raped by Mr. Epstein after being recruited into his circle in 2001 outside her Manhattan high school, said she was angry that he would not have to face his accusers in court.

"We have to live with the scars of his actions for the rest of our lives, while he will never face the consequences of the crimes he committed — the pain and trauma he caused so many people," Ms. Araoz said. She said she hoped investigators would pursue charges against people who had aided and protected Mr. Epstein.

[Read more: Mr. Epstein's accusers called for investigators to continue an inquiry into his confidants.]

The United States attorney in Manhattan, Geoffrey S. Berman, said in a statement that the investigation into Mr. Epstein's misconduct would continue, pointing specifically to the conspiracy charge, which suggested Mr. Epstein was assisted by others who helped facilitate his illegal acts.

"Today's events are disturbing, and we are deeply aware of their potential to present yet another hurdle to giving Epstein's many victims their day in court," Mr. Berman said.

The apparent demise of the new federal prosecution also led to widespread airing of unfounded conspiracy theories online on Saturday, with people questioning who would benefit from Mr. Epstein's death. President Trump, who has a history of promoting unfounded conspiracy theories, retweeted one of those posts without comment, fueling the wild speculation.

Until last year, it seemed that Mr. Epstein had largely been able to avoid further scandal over his dealings with young women and girls.

But then new questions were raised about the earlier plea agreement in an investigative report published by The Miami Herald in November 2018 which quoted four of Mr. Epstein's victims, who are now adults, on the record for the first time.

In February, the Justice Department said it had opened an investigation into the nonprosecution agreement. The inquiry is reviewing whether prosecutors committed professional misconduct in their handling of the earlier Epstein case.

At the same time, federal prosecutors in Manhattan, apparently spurred by The Miami Herald investigation, opened their own inquiry into accusations of sex trafficking by Mr. Epstein.

The United States attorney in Florida who handled the 2008 case was R. Alexander Acosta, who was President Trump's labor secretary. After the new charges were announced against Mr. Epstein in July, Mr. Acosta's work on the earlier case came under intense criticism, and he resigned.

[Read more: How Mr. Epstein become a symbol of wealth, privilege and depravity.]

Mr. Epstein was arrested on July 6 at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey after his private plane landed on a flight from Paris.

He was accused of hiring dozens of girls as young as 14 to perform nude massages on him, at which point he would masturbate and touch their genitals with his hands or with sex toys. The abuse was said to have occurred at both his Upper East Side mansion and his palatial waterfront home in Palm Beach, Fla., between 2002 and 2005.

The girls were paid hundreds of dollars in cash for the encounters and, once recruited, were asked to return to his homes several times, where they were abused again, the indictment against him said.

Prosecutors said Mr. Epstein asked some of the girls to recruit other girls, creating a network of vulnerable victims.

He pleaded not guilty to the charges. If convicted, he would have faced up to 45 years in prison.

Mr. Epstein had initially sought home detention at his Upper East Side mansion while he awaited trial. His lawyers had proposed allowing Mr. Epstein to post a substantial bond and stay in his luxurious seven-story townhouse, watched by 24-hour security guards, at his expense.

But a federal judge denied the request, concluding that Mr. Epstein was a flight risk and citing his "vast wealth," which prosecutors have placed at more than \$500 million.

Mr. Epstein's younger brother, Mark, was his "only living immediate family member," according to a memo filed in federal court last month by Mr. Epstein's lawyers. The memo described the pair as close.

Mr. Epstein, a former money manager with Wall Street experience, had long depicted himself as a wealthy financier with stellar investment savvy.

In addition to his homes in Florida and New York, he owned a private island in the United States Virgin Islands, a massive ranch in New Mexico and a residence in Paris. He had numerous luxury vehicles and access to private planes and helicopters.

Even after he served time in a Florida jail and became a registered sex offender, Mr. Epstein successfully maintained a reputation as a billionaire investor and philanthropist.

Still, since Mr. Epstein's arrest last month, evidence has emerged that the former money manager's business acumen was more myth than fact. His client list was not as extensive as believed, and the services he offered were less remarkable than once portrayed.

Earlier this week, perhaps Mr. Epstein's most notable client, Mr. Wexner, the retail executive behind Victoria's Secret and Bath & Body Works, accused Mr. Epstein of misappropriating "vast sums of money" from him and his family.

After Mr. Epstein's arrest in July, some Wall Street titans found themselves forced to answer questions as to why they had continued to socialize or do business with him after his 2008 conviction. They included the private equity billionaire Leon Black, the longtime banking executive Jes Staley and the hedge fund manager Glenn Dubin.

The executives all said they had no knowledge he had engaged in sex trafficking, and had sought to minimize their contacts with Mr. Epstein in recent years.

Also drawing attention were a number of major universities — including Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology — that had accepted large contributions from foundations established by Mr. Epstein even after his 2008 conviction.

The contributions to the universities and to scientists at those schools were part of a campaign by Mr. Epstein to polish his image and get himself back into the good graces of the academic and corporate elite.

But even as Mr. Epstein was trying to rebrand himself, he continued to peddle dubious ideas.

A number of scientists said he had showed an interest in biogenetic engineering and had discussed a plan to seed the human race with his DNA by having young women impregnated at his Zorro Ranch in New Mexico.

There is no indication that Mr. Epstein ever took steps toward carrying out those plans, but some in the scientific world continued to meet with him and take his money.

Long before he generated the riches that facilitated those interactions, Mr. Epstein came from modest beginnings. He was born in Brooklyn in 1953 and grew up in Coney Island; his father worked for the city Parks Department.

Mr. Epstein was something of a prodigy, playing the piano at 5, skipping two grades in school and graduating from Lafayette High School in Brooklyn when he was 16.

Though Mr. Epstein took college classes, he never received a degree. Instead, he landed a job as a math and physics teacher at the Dalton School, an elite private school in Manhattan in 1974. His time there was brief, but some students recalled that Mr. Epstein was willing to violate norms in his encounters with girls.

An administrator told The Times that he was dismissed from Dalton for poor performance.

But it was through Dalton, a prestigious school with well-heeled parents and alumni, that Mr. Epstein came into closer contact with New York's rich and powerful. After leaving the school, he eventually took a job at the Wall Street investment bank Bear Stearns.

In 1981, Mr. Epstein left Bear Stearns to start his own advisory firm and in 1988, he formed J. Epstein & Company, the investment firm that would help him build his network of connections to wealthy Wall Street executives.

The exact details of Mr. Epstein's money management operation were shrouded in secrecy, as was his client list.

Mr. Epstein claimed to be handling finances for a number of billionaires, but his only prominent known investor was Mr. Wexner.

In 1991, Mr. Wexner gave Mr. Epstein unfettered authority to handle his personal fortune for roughly 16 years. That enabled Mr. Epstein to become hugely wealthy himself and supplied him with the Wall Street bona fides he needed to seek business from other executives.

Along the way, Mr. Epstein would acquire a mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side that had once belonged to Mr. Wexner, as well as a Boeing 727 jet from Mr. Wexner's company.

The money he made working for Mr. Wexner enabled Mr. Epstein to buy his own island in the United States Virgin Islands, where he relocated much of his financial advisory business in 1999.

Mr. Wexner, now 81, has said he had severed all ties to Mr. Epstein in late 2007. Just this week, he wrote in a letter to his charitable foundation that he had learned that year that Mr. Epstein had misappropriated vast sums from him.

But Mr. Wexner apparently never notified authorities of the suspected misappropriation — even though Mr. Epstein was, at the time, being investigated in Florida for engaging in sex with underage girls.

Katie Benner, Matthew Goldstein, Sam Roberts, Daniel E. Slotnik and Emily Steel contributed reporting.

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