

CASE STUDY

DEBORAH JEANE PALFREY

Deborah Jeane Palfrey, known as the “DC Madam,” was brought up on charges of racketeering and money laundering related to running a prostitution ring in Washington, DC, and surrounding suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. The clientele of this prostitution ring included some notable politicians, such as state senators and other elected officials. Palfrey faced a maximum of 55 years in prison but likely would have received far less time had she not committed suicide before her sentencing. Her body was found in a storage facility at her mother’s home in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

News reports revealed that she had served time before (for prostitution). Author Dan Moldea told *Time* magazine that she had contacted him for a book he was working on and told him “she had done time once before . . . and it damned near killed her. She said there was enormous stress—it made her sick, she couldn’t take it, and she wasn’t going to let that happen again.”¹ The situation could have been worsened by the heightened media attention this case received; while most prostitution cases are handled by local or state courts, this one was handled by federal courts because it concerned Washington, DC.

It is quite likely that the impending maximum prison sentence led her to take her own life, given what she had said to Moldea. This shows the type of deterrent effect that jail or prison can have on an individual—in this case, possibly leading her to choose death over serving time. Ironically, Palfrey had commented to the press, after the suicide of a former employee in her prostitution network—Brandy Britton, who hanged herself before going to trial—“I guess I’m made of something that Brandy Britton wasn’t made of.”² It seems that Palfrey had the same concerns as Britton, and she ended up contradicting her bold statement when she ended her own life.

This case study provides an example of the profound effects legal sanctions can have on individuals. Legal sanctions are not meant to inspire offenders to end their lives, but this case does illustrate the potential deterrent effects of facing punishment from the legal system. We can see this on a smaller scale when a speeding driver’s heart rate increases at the sight of a highway patrol or other police vehicle (which studies show happens to most drivers). Even though this offense would result in only a fine, it is a good example of deterrence in our everyday lives. We will revisit the Palfrey case at the conclusion of this chapter, after you have had a chance to review some of the theoretical propositions and concepts that make up deterrence theory.



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Deborah Jeane Palfrey, known as the “D.C. Madam,” committed suicide before being sentenced. Her case reveals the potentially powerful effects of formal sanctions on individuals’ decision-making.

On a related note, a special report from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, concludes that the suicide rate has been far higher among jail inmates than among prison inmates (see Figures 3.1 through 3.3).³ Specifically, suicides in jails have tended over the past few decades to occur 300% (or three times) more often than among prison inmates.

A likely reason for this phenomenon is that many persons arrested and/or awaiting trial (which is generally the status of those in jail) have more to lose, such as in their relationships with family, friends, and employers, than do the typical chronic offenders that end up in prison. Specifically, many of the individuals picked up for prostitution and other relatively minor, albeit embarrassing, offenses are of the middle- and upper-class mentality and, thus, are ill-equipped to face the real-world consequences of their arrest. The good news is, this same Department of Justice report showed that suicides in both jails and prisons have decreased during the past few decades, likely due to better policies in correctional settings regarding persons considered at “high risk” for suicide.

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THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Do you think that some of the clientele (e.g., notable politicians) should have also been charged for a criminal offense?
2. Do you think it made a difference that this case was handled by federal courts rather than local or state courts?
3. Do you think prostitution should be legal?