

Does Money Bury Crime?

By Molly Figas

How can someone reduce their prison sentence or get rid of it all together? Often with a great lawyer and a lot of money. Robert Durst had both, and that's how he escaped a ninety-nine-year sentence. Avoiding judicial consequences is common for other wealthy people too, whether it's hiding a DUI charge from college records or paying for inflicted damages with cash. Our judicial system is not immune to corruption, and at the center of it is one harsh reality: our net worth often determines our outcomes in a courtroom. The ability to hire great lawyers comes with the ability to pay for their skills, which is often hundreds of thousands of dollars. This isn't surprising though, as all our laws come with a price tag attached. You can park wherever you want for a hundred-dollar ticket, and, consequently, you can be involved in a murder and pay your \$300,000 bail and run free. Unfortunately, not only do wealthier people have a better chance at a fair trial, but they also possess the ability to bury crimes, have them removed from records, and forgotten about.

The Durst trial was popular because of its peculiar outcome, as well as Durst's connection to a well-known NYC company. The Durst Organization is a multi-billion-dollar real estate company that owns much of New York's famous Wall Street. The company was owned by Robert Durst's father, and Durst was left a large sum of the money. This money aided him in having expensive support during his trial. I saw that most other trials did not have an abundance of cash to spare. I began watching lots of true crime documentaries with my father and that is when I noticed that this case was different from the others.

Durst's trial also began a conversation about our written laws. There is no question that Durst's acquittal was due to a sneaky maneuver through our laws, with his lawyers arguing that Durst did not fire the killing shot, despite owning the gun and disposing of the deceased's body. This trial did prove the importance of a good lawyer: freedom or the death penalty.

When first arrested for suspicion of being involved in the murder of his neighbor, Durst quickly received his full bail after a short phone call with his wife. He was then able to walk right out of the police station. Considering that the median yearly income of an upper-class family is less than half of Durst's bill, and for most Americans, having that amount of money easily accessible is unimaginable. Even the police were surprised as one officer jokingly asked, "well do you have \$300,000?" And Durst replied, "well not on me." However, just because one can afford the posted bail, they are still a danger to be free in society. Overall, this trial brought to light an unfair advantage for wealthy people.

Matt Pearce, a reporter for *The LA Times*, examines how Durst's verdict was possible in his article "How Did Robert Durst Chop Up a Body and Not Get Convicted of Murder?" He explains the strange turn of events through Robert Durst's trial. First, Pearce shows the events leading up to the trial, which he follows with his description of the jury and quotes from Durst himself. Finally, Pearce explains the thought process of Durst's lawyers and their opinions of the case. Altogether, the author can explain the trial in detail. He is able to describe Durst for who he is, as well as the various crimes he committed. However, in the end, neither of us can change the outcome of the trial, but we can try to understand what led to it. We can also learn exactly how well-paid lawyers were able to work around the system and let Robert Durst roam free for so long.

In my view, there are too many ways for wealthy people to avoid consequences, and it happens too often. I agree that cases like Durst's seem unfair because I have seen cases similar lost by people with much less money. Though I also do not understand how Durst was able to get away with the crime, I do believe it had mostly to do with his social status and income.

I began watching true crime documentaries with my father a few years ago. We would stay up late and argue over the mishandling of case files, bias police work, or false narratives. We enjoyed being a part of a larger search, especially knowing that in a few short hours our burning questions would have answers. Robert Durst's case stuck out, mostly because it originally made no sense to us. However, the more you learned about it, the more unfair it felt. And it began to make sense, the answer was just something we had not yet known: that money holds a terrible power to our judicial system. Immediately, the case reminded us of another show we had watched previously. This one follows two men accused of the murder of a young woman. However, these men were not murderers, but unwealthy, unlucky guys who ended up serving eleven years. Through false accusations and forced confessions, the men sat behind bars with no hope. They had no money for a powerful lawyer. And not until one of the men studied the law and proved his own innocence with DNA testing did they go free. Less than a week before their scheduled execution. The contrast between the two cases proved to me the reason Durst was free: money. Matt Pearce, *The LA Times* writer, explained Durst's legal team's approach. "At the sensational 2003 trial, Durst's legal team, spearheaded by Houston attorney Richard DeGuerin, laid out an elaborate argument of self-defense -- that a jury of eight women and four men agreed with." This gives us a glimpse into how the trial was eventually won. Later on in his article, Matt Pearce mentioned the bail requirement Durst easily completed. "After Durst was charged with the murder, he posted a \$300,000 bond and then fled Texas. Durst was later caught in

Pennsylvania while shoplifting a chicken sandwich and a box of bandages and was brought back to Texas to face trial.” We are able to see how having the bond easily paid gave Durst the ability to be out in the world again. We later would find out that during this time he completed the murder of Susan Berman, later putting him on trial once again where he would finally be found guilty. This time, Durst passed away at 78 before finishing trial. He never served time for the murders, which I believe to be a failure of our system.