



Criminal Justice: Glossary of Terms

The U.S. Criminal Justice System is filled with jargon and terms that can be confusing, misused, or unknown to most people. Advocacy & Communication Solutions' tool Criminal Justice: Glossary of Terms will help you become familiar with these words and phrases so you can better understand the elements of the system.

And read ACS' eBlast, [The Criminal Justice System: Is it time to take out the word "Justice"?](#), for more information about our criminal justice system and to see how these terms apply within its various components.

Check out more [ACS glossaries](#) on other topics such as Health and Human Services, Workforce Development, and K-12 Education at advocacyandcommunication.org.

What is the Criminal Justice System?

The U.S. Criminal Justice system is the network of institutions through which an accused offender passes until they are acquitted or convicted, their charges dismissed, or their punishment ends. The system typically includes three components: (1) law enforcement, (2) the judicial process, and (3) corrections.

The following terms and definitions are those you will often find used within the system, organized under each of its three components:

1. Law Enforcement and Entry Into the Criminal Justice System

Accused

A person or persons formally charged or implicated in wrongdoing but not yet convicted of a crime¹. person or persons formally charged or implicated in wrongdoing but not yet convicted of a crime¹.

Arraignment

The first court appearance of a person accused of a crime. At this proceeding, the defendant will hear the charges that have been brought against him and may enter a plea¹.

Bail/Bond

Money or property required by the court for the release of a prisoner who must appear in court at a future time¹.

Count

Each separate offense listed in a criminal complaint or an indictment accusing a person of committing a crime¹.

Jurisdiction

The geographical area over which particular courts have power².

Protected Characteristics

It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of³.

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

2. The Judicial Process

Adjudication

The judicial process that ends a criminal proceeding by a judgment of acquittal, conviction, or dismissal of a case¹.

Bench Trial

A trial in which the judge hears the case without a jury and decides whether the accused is guilty¹.

Conditional Discharge

A disposition in criminal cases where the defendant must satisfy certain court-ordered conditions instead of a prison term¹.

Conviction

The act or process of finding someone guilty of a crime¹.

Defendant

A person who is arrested and charged with a crime¹.

Dismissal

A judge's decision to end the case, without convicting or acquitting the defendant¹.

Felony

A crime that is punishable by imprisonment of more than one year¹.



Guilty

A verdict of a judge or jury that a person accused of committing a crime did commit it¹.

Hearing

A judicial proceeding where a judge may hear argument and evidence so as to decide issues of law or of fact¹.

Indictment

A formal charging document presented by a grand jury to a court for prosecution against the defendant¹.

Misdemeanor

A crime that is less serious than a felony and that is usually punishable by a fine, penalty, forfeiture, or imprisonment of less than one year¹.

Plea Bargain

An agreement struck between a criminal defendant and prosecutor. In exchange for a guilty plea from the defendant, the prosecutor will either (1) drop one of several charges, (2) lower the charge, or (3) recommend a light sentence¹.

2.1 Sentencing and Sanctions

Gang Enhancement

An additional prison sentence that is added to the underlying felony committed for the benefit of, at the discretion of, or in association with any criminal street gang, provided the person had the specific intent to promote, further, or assist in any criminal conduct by gang members⁴.

Jail

City- or county-run facilities where a majority of people locked up are there awaiting trial (in other words, still legally innocent), many because they can't afford to post bail⁵.

Parole

The conditional release of a prisoner from imprisonment before the full sentence has been served¹.

Prison

Facilities under state or federal control where people who have been convicted (usually of felonies) go to serve their sentences⁵.

Restitution

Money ordered to be paid by a criminal defendant to a victim for expenses related to the crime¹.

Sentence

A sentence is what a judge or jury formally pronounces after a criminal defendant has been found guilty; the sentence is the consequence and/or penalty for the crime¹.

3. Corrections

Parole Revocation

The act of returning a parolee to prison because of the parolee's failure to abide by the conditions of parole¹.

Probation

An alternative to prison. This sentence requires the offender to follow certain conditions, usually under the supervision of a probation officer².

Violation of Probation

Action or inaction that disobeys a condition of probation¹.

References:

¹ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OVA/Common-Legal-Terms/2014TermsandDefenitionsFINAL.pdf.pdf>

² <https://www.crf-usa.org/criminal-justice-in-america-4th-edition-links/glossary.html>

³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics>

⁴ <https://www.lacriminaldefenseattorney.com/legal-dictionary/g/gang-enhancement>

⁵ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html>