

Criminal Justice Glossary

Although fairly standard in the law enforcement and court arena, some terms may appear on criminal records that are unfamiliar to the layperson. The following includes some of the terms and abbreviations seen on criminal records processed over the years. Also included are some we thought would be useful in understanding the law enforcement/judicial process.

Although most of the definitions have been verified through standard dictionaries and authoritative reference books, always consider the context in which the word is used. Watch also the use of "degrees," such as one, two and three, voluntary or involuntary, petty or grand. In many cases, these are assigned for purposes of applying fines or punishment and may be relevant to you in making your decision.

This list should be used only as a guide in interpreting criminal record information. Some jurisdictions may interpret some of the terms contained herein differently. This glossary should not be considered to be all-inclusive nor is it intended to constitute legal advice. It is especially important to consult legal counsel when making difficult decisions based on court records.

A

Abduction Taking away by violence or fraud and persuasion; kidnapping. Usually a female or wife, child or ward.

Abet See Aiding and Abetting.

Abstraction Taking away with intent to harm or deceive.

Accessory Not the perpetrator of the crime but in some way involved without being present in the commission of the crime.

Accessory After the Fact One who helps a criminal to elude arrest.

Accessory Before the Fact One who induces another to commit a crime.

Acquittal A not-guilty verdict absolving an accused party of guilt. Release or absolution.

Adjudication The legal process by which a case or claim is settled. May also be the final pronouncement of judgment in a case or claim.

Adjudication Withheld The court will withhold a decision until a future date. Usually some sort of probation is added and if the defendant complies with the conditions for a specified period of time, the case will be dismissed.

Affidavit A voluntarily, written statement of fact, confirmed by oath.

Affray Brawl or disturbance. Not premeditated.

Aggravated (assault, battery, arson, etc.) Circumstances surrounding the commission of a crime or tort which increase or add to its injurious consequences.



Aiding and Abetting To assist and/or incite another to commit a crime.

Alias False name used in substitution of a legal name on official documents and for official purposes. Nicknames are not considered aliases. May be noted as AKA (Also Known As) on criminal records.

Antitrust Acts or Laws Laws to protect trade and commerce from unlawful practice.

Appeal A complaint to a superior court to review the decision of a lower court.

Appellant One who makes a complaint to a superior court to review the decision of a lower court.

Appellate Court A court having jurisdiction of appeal and review. Not a trial court.

Appropriate To take something from another for one's own use or benefit.

Archive/Archives The place where records are stored after a certain specified period of time. The period of time a record is held at a court of record may differ between courts and states.

Arraignment A call to the accused to come before the court to hear charges or enter a plea.

Arrest The taking of an individual into custody by law enforcement personnel for the purpose of charging them with an illegal act.

Arrest Record An official form completed by the police department when a person is arrested. Also, a cumulative record of all instances in which a person has been arrested.

Arson The attempted or intentional destruction of property by fire or explosion.

Assault Intentional or threatened infliction of injury to another. The classification of "aggravated" is assigned when the injury is considered serious or when injury is threatened or carried out with the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon. The classification of "simple" is assigned when the injury inflicted or threatened is not serious and a deadly weapon is not used. May be used with Battery.

B

Bail An amount of money, set by a judge at an initial appearance to ensure the return of the accused at subsequent proceedings.

Battery Non-consensual, unlawful contact, such as touching, beating or wounding of another. See Assault.

Bench Trial Trial by judge, without jury.

Bench Warrant A process delivered by the court directing a law enforcement agency to bring a specified individual before the court.



Bind Over To put under bond to appear in court. The term is also used when a case is shifted from a lower court to a higher court.

Blackmail An illegal demand for money or property under threat of harm or exposure of undesirable acts.

Bond A certificate of obligation, either unsecured or secured with collateral, to pay a specified amount of money within a specified period of time.

Bond Forfeiture Bond forfeiture occurs when a case has been disposed and a fine is to be, or has been paid. If it is a first offense, it is listed on the record but not classified as a conviction; any other time it is classified as a conviction.

Bookmaking An operation with the purpose of placing, registering, paying off or collecting debts for bets.

Burglary The act of entering a premises, without the privilege to enter, with the purpose of committing a crime. States may classify as first, second, or third degree burglary.

C

Capias The Latin meaning is "That You Take". This is the name for several types of writs which require that a law enforcement official take a named defendant into custody.

Capital Case/Crime Case or crime for which the death penalty may be imposed.

Capital Punishment Punishment by death for capital crime.

Carnal Sexual, sensual. Carnal knowledge is sexual intercourse.

Cause of Action One or more related charges, combined and made against a defendant for wrongs committed.

Charge In criminal law, a charge is an allegation that an individual has committed a specific offense.

Citation An order issued by a law enforcement officer requiring appearance in court to answer a charge. Bail is not accepted in lieu of appearance.

Circuit Judicial division of the United States or of an individual state.

Circuit Courts Courts whose jurisdiction extends over several counties or districts. (There are thirteen judicial circuits wherein the U.S. Courts of Appeals reside).

City Court Courts that try persons accused of violating municipal ordinances. City courts may have jurisdiction over minor civil or criminal cases, or both.

Civil Disorder A violent public disturbance by three or more people which causes danger, damage or injury to property or persons.

Co-defendant One of a group of two or more people charged in the same crime.

Coercion The use of physical force or threats to compel someone to commit an act against their will.

Compounding Crime The receipt by an individual of consideration in exchange for an agreement not to prosecute or inform on someone who they know has committed a crime.

Concurrent Sentences Two or more terms of imprisonment served simultaneously.

Conditional Discharge A conviction. Court issues the discharge from the jail and requires defendant to comply with some conditions. Regardless whether defendant complies with rules or not, he/she is still convicted (GUILTY) and case can never be expunged.

Conditional Release The release from a correctional facility before full sentence has been served which is conditioned on specific behavior. If conditions are not met, the individual may be returned to the facility.

Consecutive Sentences Multiple sentences, served one after the other.

Conspiracy The coming together of two or more people for the purpose of committing an unlawful act or to commit a lawful act by unlawful means.

Contempt of Court An act committed which serves to obstruct the court in its administration or authority.

Controlled Substance A drug whose availability is restricted by law.

Conversion The unauthorized taking of another's property.

Conviction Guilty verdict in a criminal trial.

Count/Charge An offense named in a cause of action. A cause of action may contain multiple counts or charges, each relating to the others but identifying a separate offense.

Court of Limited Jurisdiction Court that has authority to adjudicate cases of a certain kind or up to a limited amount, usually lesser offenses. (Opposite of Court of General Jurisdiction)

Court of Record The court where the permanent record of all proceedings is held.

Credit Card Fraud Use, or attempted use of a credit card to purchase goods or services with the intent to avoid payment of such.

Crime Against Nature Deviate sexual intercourse.

Criminal Nonsupport Failure to pay child support in violation of court order.

Culpability Blame, or degree of responsibility for a crime. This may be in degrees of purposeful, knowingly, recklessly or by negligence.

Cumulative Sentence A sentence that takes effect after a prior sentence is completed for crimes tried under the same cause of action.

D

Dangerous Weapon Something that is capable, though not designed to cause serious injury or death.

De Novo Latin for "anew" or "afresh". Usually used as Trial De Novo. New trial, or one that is held for a second time, as if there had been no previous trial or decision.

Dead Docket The case never went to trial. The case can be reopened if new evidence is submitted.

Deadly Weapon A weapon designed to cause serious injury or death.

Defendant A person against whom a cause of action is taken.

Deferred Adjudication of Guilt The final judgment is delayed for a period of time. Can be likened to probation before a final verdict. If "probation" is completed without incident, the charges are usually dropped and the case is dismissed. During the "probationary period" the disposition is not necessarily considered a conviction.

Deferred Discharge Dismissed and considered a non-conviction.

Deferred Probation The judge doesn't make a finding of guilt; he assigns probation. If probation is completed without incident, the charges are usually dropped.

Deferred Sentence Postponement of the pronouncement of the sentence.

Defraud Knowingly misrepresenting facts to cheat or trick.

Degree (First, Second, or Third, A, B or C) Classification assigned to a crime, depending on circumstances, for purposes of determining punishment. First degree is considered more serious than third; A is more serious than C. Degrees may be assigned to the actual crime (i.e. murder in the first or second degree) or the class of crimes (IE: felony or misdemeanor).

Directed Verdict A determination by a jury, made at the direction of the judge. A directed verdict happens in cases where there has been a lack of evidence, an overwhelming amount of evidence, or where the law is in favor of one of the parties.

Dismissal Finally disposing of the cause without further consideration. May be voluntary or involuntary. When involuntary, there is usually lack of prosecution or failure to produce sufficient evidence.

Dismissal Without Leave After Deferred Prosecution Charges dismissed after specified time (90 days to 1 year) provided certain conditions have been met such as participating in specified program of anger control or drug counseling or providing community service, etc.



Disposed/Disposition The final settlement in the matter. Examples of disposed cases are those with a finding of guilt (conviction), innocence, or acquittal.

Diversion Program To set aside. A court direction which calls a defendant, who has been found guilty, to attend a work or educational program as part of probation. May include some type of anger management, drug rehab, etc. If the condition of program is met, charge may be considered non-conviction.

Diversity of Citizenship A crime or claim which extends between citizens of different states. This is one of the grounds that can be used to invoke the jurisdiction of the U.S. Federal District Court.

Docket Record A court's official record of proceedings and calendar of upcoming cases.

Driving While Intoxicated Operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Complete intoxication is not required. Individual state statutes specify the blood alcohol content at which a person is presumed to be under the influence of intoxicating liquor.

Due Diligence A reasonable and expected measure of attention taken for a particular action. Not measurable by an absolute standard, but dependant on the situation.

Due Process of Law Procedures followed by law enforcement and courts to insure the protection of an individual's rights as assigned by the Constitution.

E

Embezzlement The taking of another's money or property by one entrusted with its possession, usually through employment.

Ex parte On one side only. When an act is for one party only. For example, in an Ex parte proceeding, only one party to the case is heard.

Expunge/Expunged When a record of an offense is expunged it will not appear on a released criminal history. The record may be destroyed or sealed after a certain period of time. Records may be expunged in juvenile cases, or upon satisfactory completion of a court-ordered probation and/or class(s).

Extortion Obtaining another's property by actual or threatened force, fear or violence.

Extradition The surrender of an individual accused or convicted of a crime by one state to another.

F

Felonious Describing an offense which is done with malicious, villainous criminal intent. (i.e. felonious assault.)

Felony A serious offense carrying a penalty of incarceration from one year to life in a state prison, to the death penalty.



Felony Conversion (Fraudulent Conversion) Similar to embezzlement or theft. An example of felony conversion is if someone sold goods for a company, and kept the money instead of turning it in to the company. (North Carolina)

Forcible Entry Entering or taking possession of property with force, threats or menacing conduct.

Fraud A broad term used to cover all kinds of acts. Generally, fraud is the commission of an act with the goal to benefit or gain advantage at another's expense. A purposeful misrepresentation with the intent to deceive.

G

Georgia 1st Offender Act O.C.G.A. § 42-8-62 (In Part) ...Upon fulfillment of the terms of probation, upon release by the court prior to the termination of the period thereof, or upon release from confinement, the defendant shall be discharged without court adjudication of guilt. The discharge shall completely exonerate the defendant of any criminal purpose and shall not affect any of his civil rights or liberties and the defendant shall not be considered to have a criminal conviction.

Grand Jury A body of persons with the authority to investigate and accuse, but not to try cases. The grand jury will listen to and review evidence to see if there are sufficient grounds to bring an individual to trial.

Grand Larceny The theft of property over a specified value. Dollar amounts vary by state.

Gross Flagrant, out of measure.

Gross Misdemeanor Serious misdemeanor.

Guilt/Guilty Final disposition. Having committed a crime.

H

Habeas Corpus A writ requesting a trial or the release of a prisoner.

Habitual Violator To have committed the same offence three times. Can also be charged as a habitual offender.

Hijacking To take control of a vehicle by intimidation, force or threatened force. Also, the theft of goods while in transit, as when transported in trucks.

Homicide The killing of another human being. "Justifiable homicide" occurs in cases such as during the enforcement of law, and/or occurs without evil intent. "Excusable homicide" may occur by accident or in self-defense. "Felonious homicide" is the killing of another without justification. This type has two degrees – manslaughter and murder, depending on circumstances or intent. See Manslaughter; Murder.

Hung Jury A hung jury is one in which all jurors cannot reach a consensus required for a verdict.

I

Illicit Prohibited or unlawful.

Incendiary One who intentionally set fires. Arsonist.

Incorrigible One who is incapable of reform.

Indictment A formal, written accusation made by the grand jury.

Infraction Violation of local ordinance or state statute usually resulting in a fine or limited period of **incarceration**. Term usually used in traffic offenses.

Injunction A court order which prohibits a person from doing a specified act for a specified period of time.

Intent The frame of mind or attitude of the person at the time an act was committed. See Culpability.

Intoxicates, Intoxication Reduction of physical or mental capabilities caused by the ingestion of an intoxicating substance such as alcohol or drugs.

Involuntary Dismissal Dismissed due to lack of prosecution or lack of evidence.

J

Judgment The final decision of the court regarding a claim or case.

Jurisdiction The power of a court to question facts, apply law, make decisions and judgments.

K

Kidnapping Taking and carrying away a person by force, fraud, threats or intimidation. Unlawfully confining a person for a substantial period of time in an isolated place.

L

Larceny The unlawful taking of another person's property. Larceny is commonly classified as "petty" or "grand" depending on the value of the property. Dollar values to establish classifications of "petty" and "grand" may vary from state to state.

Legal Malice An act, committed without just cause or excuse, intended to inflict harm or cause death.



Lewd and Lascivious Obscene, indecent.

Libel Defamation of another person through print, pictures, or signs.

Lis Pendens A pending suit.

M

Magistrate Public officials, including judicial officers who have limited jurisdiction in criminal cases and civil causes.

Mail Fraud The use of the mail system to commit a fraud.

Malice Aforethought Planning to commit an unlawful act without just cause or excuse.

Manslaughter The unpremeditated killing of a person. Can be voluntary or involuntary, determined by circumstances. The feature distinguishing involuntary manslaughter from voluntary is the absence of intent to cause death or commit an act that might be expected to produce death or harm. Voluntary manslaughter is homicide that is committed during an act in the heat of passion.

Mayhem The intentional infliction of injury on another which causes amputation, disfigurement or impairs the function of any part of the body.

Mistrial A trial which is terminated or declared invalid. Reasons for mistrial include misconduct on the part of the jury, defense team or the court, or illness on the part of the judge, jury or defendant. May be followed by a retrial on the same charges.

Murder Unlawful killing with malice aforethought. Murder is willful, deliberate and premeditated, or done during the commission of a crime. This classification of crime is generally divided by degrees, murder in the first degree and murder in the second degree, for the purpose of imposing penalties.

N

Negligence Flagrant and reckless disregard of the safety of others. Willful indifference.

Negotiated Plea See Plea Bargain.

No Bill or No True Bill The decision by a grand jury that it will not bring indictment against the accused on the basis of the allegations and evidence presented by the prosecutor.

No Contest A plea in which the defendant does not contest the charge. This has the same effect as a guilty plea except the conviction cannot be used against the defendant in a civil suit.

No Papered Charges were not pursued. (This is a legal term in Washington, D.C.)

No Probable Cause There was not sufficient reason to bring case to trial.

Nolli Illigiti Carborundum Latin phrase loosely translated, "hang in there."

Nolle Pros or Nolle Prosequi Latin phrase used by the district attorney or plaintiff when they do not wish to prosecute or proceed with the action.

Nolo Contendre Latin phrase used by a defendant to say "I do not wish to contest." This plea in a criminal case has the legal effect of pleading guilty. See No Contest.

O

Obtain Property under False Pretense The misrepresentation of the value of something. Passing bad check.

P

Pander To provide products or services which cater to the sexual gratification of others. To entice another into prostitution.

Parole To release from confinement after serving part of a sentence, usually with terms and conditions provided in the parole order.

Parole Violation An act that does not conform to the terms of parole.

Perjury Intentionally making a false statement under oath.

Plea The defendant's formal answer to a charge.

Plea Bargain A plea of guilt to a lesser offense in return for a lighter sentence.

Prayer for Judgment, 1st Offense (NC) Asking the court to give leniency. No finding of guilt by the court.

Pre-Trial Intervention An extensive background check to help determine if charges will be pressed.

Probation Relief of all or part of a sentence on the promise of proper conduct.

Q

Quash/Quashed Declined to prosecute but with the option to reopen the case.

R

Racketeering An organized conspiracy for the purpose of committing crimes of extortion or coercion.

Rape Sex without consent. May be forcible or by intoxication, with a person who is underage and unable to give consent, or with a person with diminished mental and/or physical capabilities.

Reckless Endangerment An act which does or could cause injury to another, not necessarily with intent.

Refused Charges were not accepted by the District Attorney's Office.

Remand To return an individual to custody pending further trial, or to return a case from an appellate to a lower court for further proceedings.

Restraining Order An order prohibiting a specified action until such time that a hearing on an application for an injunction can be held.

Retired (as Disposition) The case can be brought up within the next year if the individual is arrested for anything. It is the judge's decision and only he can take action. If the individual remains "clean," then the case can be dismissed.

RICO Act Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act.

S

Secreting Lien Property Hiding property that has a lien filed against it.

Sedition Advocating the overthrow or reform of a government by unlawful means.

Sentence A judgment of punishment for a criminal act.

Serious Misdemeanor Having a more severe penalty than other misdemeanors.

Slander Defamation verbal communication. Making false and malicious statements about another.

Solicitation Asking, urging or enticing.

Status: Closed No further action will occur on this case; cannot be reopened at later date.

Statutory Rape Sexual activity by an adult with a person under the age of consent.

Stricken To eliminate or expunge.

Suspended Sentence Deferment of punishment usually over a period of probation.

T

Theft of Services Obtaining services without consent through deception, threat, tampering, etc.



Theft/unauthorized Theft by using someone else's information, credit card, check, or something similar.

Truncated Files Destroyed or partially destroyed. Unable to obtain any more information.

U

Under the Influence of Intoxicating Liquor or Drugs Any condition where the nervous system, brain or muscles are impaired to an appreciable degree by an intoxicating substance.

Usury Charging more interest than is permitted by law for a loan of money.

Unlawful Entry Entry without force and without permission by means of fraud or other wrongful act.

Uttering To forge another's name.

V

Vacate (Judgment) To make void; to cancel.

Vehicular Homicide Death of another caused by the intentional, unlawful or negligent operation of a motor vehicle.

Venue The geographic area where the case or claim occurred, within which a court with jurisdiction can hear and determine a case. A change of venue, or the moving of a case from one court to another may be granted for such reasons as when the court does not think the defendant can get a fair trial in that area or for the convenience of the parties in a civil case.

Verdict The formal, final decision or finding made by a jury or judge.

Voluntary Dismissal The court or district attorney dismisses the charges against an individual.

W

Waiver by Magistrate Charges are waived after the defendant agrees to pay a fine. The defendant is not prosecuted on this charge.

Waiver of Jury The right to a jury trial is waived and the judge makes the decision of guilt or innocence.

Wanton Reckless, malicious. Without regard for the rights of others, indifferent to consequences to health, life or the reputation of another. Usually done without intent, but an act so unreasonable the perpetrator should know that harm will result.

Warrant Court order authorizing a law enforcement official to arrest or perform search and seizure.

Weapons Offenses The unlawful sale, distribution, manufacture, alteration, transport, possession or use of a deadly or dangerous weapon.

With Specifications When W/S is listed after a charge, it is usually followed with a description of violence involved with the charge.

Withheld Adjudication withheld.

Writ A written court order, or a judicial process.

Wrongful Entrustment Allowing an unlicensed driver to operate a motor vehicle.

Y

Youthful Offender Classification of youths and young adults, generally older than juveniles. In the 18 to 25 year age group, these individuals are sometimes given special sentencing consideration for the purpose of rehabilitation, sometimes through education and counseling.

Youthful Training Act Usually a non-conviction. Used for juvenile first-time offenders. It may be reported on a criminal record. If the juvenile complies with the sentence, the case will be dropped from the record when the offender reaches adulthood.