

Criminal Legal System Glossary for Kids



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Lots of different words and phrases are used to talk about the criminal legal system, and some of these may be unfamiliar and confusing. This glossary explains these terms, so you can better understand what's happening with your case, what you're being asked to do, and what might happen next.

If it's helpful, you can use this glossary alongside the Criminal Legal System Process Map to see how everything fits together.

1. **Adjournment/Postponement/Continuance**

When the court changes the date for a hearing or trial.

2. **Appeal**

If a defendant doesn't agree with the verdict in their case, they can appeal their case to a higher court to try to get a new trial.

3. **Arrest**

When the police take someone to jail because they think that the person committed a crime. The arrest may happen right after the crime or much later. The police may put handcuffs on the person while arresting them.

4. **Bail**

After someone is charged with a crime, the judge may let them go home until their case is finished. Bail is money they have to pay to stay out of jail until they come back to court. They may also have to follow certain rules or conditions while they are out on bail.

□ **Bench Warrant**

When a defendant does not come to court for their hearing, the judge can issue a bench warrant to tell the police to arrest them and bring them to court.

□ **Remand**

When a defendant is sent to jail.

5. **Charging**

When the police or the prosecutor accuse someone of committing a crime.

❑ **Arraignment**

When the defendant is told about the charges against them. For a misdemeanor, arraignment often happens during a hearing with a judge.

❑ **Indictment**

For a felony, charging can happen in the Grand Jury or in a preliminary hearing with a judge and is called an indictment.

❑ **Grand Jury**

A group of people from the community who the prosecutor presents evidence to so they can decide whether or not to charge the person with a crime.

6. Compliance Review

When a defendant has to go back to court, so the judge can make sure they're following all the rules and doing what they're supposed to do.

7. Court

A building where people go to talk with a judge about crimes and other problems.

8. Crime

All communities have rules about what is and is not allowed, which are called laws. A crime is when someone breaks the law by doing something that is not allowed.

9. Cross Examination

When a lawyer asks the other side's witness questions during a trial.

10. Direct Examination

When a lawyer asks their own witness questions during a trial.

11. Discovery

When the prosecutor and defense attorney share the evidence they have gathered with each other.

12. Dismissal

When a case ends because the prosecutor or judge decides there isn't enough evidence to keep going.

13. Disposition

The end of a case. A case can be dismissed because the prosecutor did not move forward with it (this is sometimes called dropping charges); the defendant can plead guilty; or there is a verdict after a trial.

14. Evidence

Information about what happened. Evidence can include what witnesses say, what the defendant says, pictures, voice or text messages, social media information, phone records, fingerprints, DNA (information from someone's body), clothing, and other things from the place where the crime happened.

15. Felony

A type of crime for which someone can receive more serious consequences, such as going to prison for a longer period of time (usually more than one year).

16. Guilty Plea/Plea Agreement

When a defendant agrees to an offer.

17. Hearing

A meeting at court where the defendant and their lawyer talk with the judge and the prosecutor about the case.

18. Interview

A meeting where the police, the prosecutor or another adult asks a witness questions about what happened.

19. Investigation

When the police and prosecutor gather evidence about a crime.

20. Misdemeanor

A type of crime for which someone can receive less serious consequences, such as going to jail for a shorter period of time (usually less than one year).

21. Objection

During a trial, if one lawyer doesn't agree with something that is happening in court, they say 'objection' to tell the judge. If a witness hears an objection, they should stop talking and wait for the judge to tell them what to do next. The judge will decide if the first lawyer can keep going (the objection is overruled) or if they have to change what they're doing (the objection is sustained).

22. Offer

The prosecutor will think about the evidence they have and tell the defendant about a guilty plea that would be OK with the prosecutor. The offer includes what crime(s) the defendant has to tell the court they committed and sometimes also what the consequences will be. The defendant can agree to an offer or not.

23. Order of Protection/Protective Order

When the judge tells the defendant that they are not allowed to talk to or go near a victim or witness; go to their home, work or school; tell anyone else to talk to them; and/or do anything to hurt or scare them. If the defendant breaks these rules, it is called a violation and they can be arrested.

24. Parole

When a person leaves prison, they may be put on parole for a certain period of time. This means they have to meet with their parole officer regularly, so the parole officer can make sure they are doing what they're supposed to do.

25. Parole Hearing

When a person is in prison, they may have a hearing with a group of people called the Parole Board, who will decide if they can go home before their sentence is finished.

26. Recess

When the judge gives everyone a break during a trial.

27. Standard of Proof

The amount of evidence needed to find a defendant guilty at trial. In criminal cases, the standard of proof is ‘beyond a reasonable doubt,’ which means that the judge or jury can’t find someone guilty unless they are very sure the person committed the crime (they don’t have any good reason to think that they didn’t do it).

28. Statement

What a witness tells the police about what happened, verbally or in writing. These statements can be used as evidence in court.

29. Testify

When a witness shares information they have about a crime in the Grand Jury or during a trial or hearing. The information they share is called their testimony and the place they sit in the courtroom is called the witness box.

□ **Oath**

A promise that a witness makes to tell the truth when they are testifying.

□ **Perjury**

When a witness says something in court that they know is not true.

□ **Subpoena**

A paper from the judge ordering a witness to come to court to testify.

30. Trial

If the prosecutor and defendant cannot agree on an offer, the case will go to trial. During a trial, both sides share their evidence in court. This can be a jury trial (when a jury listens to the evidence and decides on the verdict) or a bench trial (only the judge decides on the verdict).

31. Witness

Someone who saw, heard, or knows information about a crime.

32. Victim

Someone who was hurt by a crime. A victim is also a witness to the crime and may be called a complaining witness or 'CW.'

33. Verdict

At the end of a trial, a defendant is either found guilty (they committed the crime) or not guilty (there is not enough evidence that they committed the crime), or the judge declares a mistrial.

□ **Acquittal**

A not guilty verdict. An acquittal does not mean that the judge/jury did not believe the victim/witness; it means they thought there wasn't enough evidence to find the defendant guilty.

□ **Conviction**

A guilty verdict.

□ **Mistrial**

When something goes wrong with the trial or the jury is not able to make a decision about the verdict. If this happens, the case can go to trial again.

34. Sentence

If someone is found guilty of a crime, the judge decides what the defendant will have to do next and what the consequences will be. The defendant may go to jail or prison, have to go to a program, be put on probation, have to pay money to the court (which is called a fine), have to pay money to the victim (which is called restitution), have an order of protection for a long time, or face other consequences.

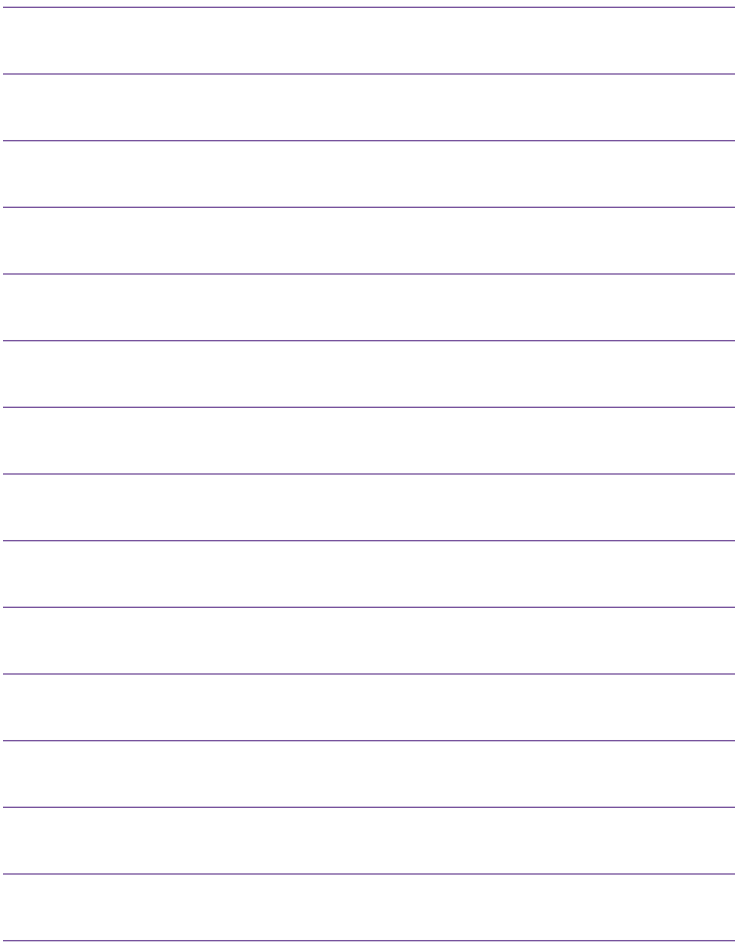
□ **Victim Impact Statement**

If the defendant is found guilty, the victim may have the right to tell the judge how they feel about the crime and what they would like the consequences to be. The victim can write down their statement or talk with the judge about it at the sentencing hearing.

□ **Probation**

A defendant might be put on probation instead of going to jail. This means that they have to meet with their probation officer regularly for a certain period of time, so the probation officer can make sure they are doing what they're supposed to do.

If there are other words that are confusing, it's OK to ask the person who is using that word to explain!







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