

Prison Lingo: An Impromptu Glossary of Commonly Used Terminology I've
Encountered behind Bars

By Noah Fischman

Prison creativity is, and probably always will be, to me, the stuff of legend, and it also happens to encompass creativity with the English language! Now let's get one thing straight; it should be common knowledge that the English language is a fucking train wreck. It is, as I've heard it described, "three separate languages sitting on each other's shoulders wearing a trench coat and fake sunglasses." If prison **material** creativity can give rise to devices like the "stinger," radios reverse-engineered into functioning cell phones, load-bearing furniture constructed entirely from cardboard, and tattoo guns made from broken pens and guitar strings, one can only imagine the bewildering abominations of prison-born idiolect.

These otherworldly verbal concoctions don't usually slide by when uttered in conversations with people from outside of prison. Unlike average jargon, they usually have the opposite and undesirable effect of utterly bulldozing the topic at hand. With the recipient now struggling like dial-up internet and Shakespeare reanimating in his grave, the fact that this absurd prisoner-speak has somehow wormed its way into my everyday vocabulary takes center stage. This is part of what's known as institutionalization, where common practices both physical and verbal within prison become unshakable, unconscious habits. I've even had fellow inmates who've done vastly more time than me chortle and snicker upon hearing me casually speak one or more of these phrases, usually followed up by an inquiry into how much time I've done and some sly remark about me becoming institutionalized. I've begrudgingly, if only partially, accepted this status.

Oddly enough, however, prison-based movies and shows that look to be believable visions of inmate life are often laughably inaccurate to actual inmates or simply fail to cover truly commonplace aspects of such. One such inaccuracy, I've noticed, is this very slang that's commonly used. The ex-felons who volunteer this sort of information for media-making purposes must be guarding the truth like they're state secrets, passing along false information in place of the good stuff and leaving screenwriters none the wiser. On this note I don't want you thinking I'm some messiah here to deliver the unequivocal truth. The truth is there's plenty here that I'll have missed, and not every term I describe in this pseudo-glossary is used in equal amounts or even at every facility, security level, or location. Some are bafflingly commonplace while others are comedic outliers that, while not necessarily uttered much, did come from - or see the most use in - prison, so they deserve placement. Hopefully though, reading this will help to clear one of the

mysteries surrounding what you do and don't see in popular prison flicks. Packaged alphabetically for your convenience, I present to you my glossary. Words or phrases mentioned in descriptions prior to their own description will be quoted and pointed out.

- **Beef/beefing**

Both a noun and a verb, this refers to when two people have a real problem with one another and are probably looking to throw hands in the near future (or already have, for that matter).

- **Blanket party**

Sounds innocent enough in name, but you know where this is going, don't you? Although considered tamer than "boot parties" (definition below) in that it's usually a hazing or initiation of sorts, this involves restraining an unsuspecting inmate with a blanket or bed sheet and pummeling them, usually with oranges or bars of soap in knotted socks. Also common in the military, the intent here is to batter the person, not turn them into a vegetable. I bet you thought it had something to do with orgies, you sick bastard.

- **Boot party**

Can be described as somewhat similar to a "smash & go" (see definition) in that it involves a bunch of guys ganging up on one or more inmates and proceeding to beat them into paste, but boot parties differ in that they primarily involve the assailants all donning their boots and focusing on kicking and stomping for maximum humiliation and damage. Boots are banned at high and some medium-security facilities for a reason.

- **Car**

A term usually synonymous with 'group' or 'clique,' it's usually used to distinguish between actual gangs and any group that's formed based on some other tangible commonality, such as ethnicity, home state, charges, veteran status, sexual orientation, etc., which are referred to as cars (the Kansas car, sex-offender car, gay car, get the idea?).

- **Cellie/bunkie**

The terms used to refer to one's cell-mate or bunk-mate, respectively. The difference specifically refers to whether the person in question lives only within your room/cube/cell (cellie), or is actually above or below you in a bunk (bunkie).

- **Checking-in**

Usually the preferable outcome for a "green-lit" (see definition) individual, this term describes going to the nearest lieutenant and stating that you're at risk at a given yard and need to go to another yard, which usually results in immediate placement in the SHU (Special Housing Unit, see definition) and possibly a pending transfer to another facility. Checking in is a common fate for those who've

△ - **Convict**

A special title given to what would be considered 'true' prisoners; convicts are prisoners who have been incarcerated for at least a quarter century (an arbitrary but generally assented figure), who have typically walked some of the bloodiest yards in the nation for at least a decade. Convicts, especially 'old-school' convicts (thirty years or more), are unafraid of getting their hands dirty, on camera or not. Fights and murder are normal facets of life, and consequences - whether it's months in the SHU or a new charge - are meaningless. Prison is their life, and they live by their own rules. For this reason, inmates and guards alike treat true convicts as a cut above the rest, deserving of special respect.

△ - **Enforcer**

This term usually relates to gang-specific roles, but it's not uncommon to encounter the term within prison cars too. Enforcers are the handymen, messengers, and... well, enforcers of the rules or etiquette within or between groups. Often directed by group "shot callers" (see definition), enforcers are dispatched to divvy out punishment to whomever it's deemed needs to be put in their place, whether it's violated etiquette, severe debts, etc. Getting 'enforced' can mean anything from a stern warning to being shanked without a word.

seriously stepped in deep shit with a person or group who aren't quite ready to smash said transgressor, but are ready to have them shish-kebabbed in the lunch line if they say no. "Chomos," "snitches," "dropouts," and "cops" (see definitions) are almost always told to check in at certain yards - usually medium & high security - just for existing. It's also not unheard of for somebody to intentionally get themselves in trouble to go to the SHU if they know they've messed up, or owe tons of money, but don't want it widely known that they've been forced to check in.

- **Chomo/SO**

Short for 'child-molester,' and 'sex-offender,' umbrella terms used to describe any and all sex-offenders regardless of whether they've actually touched a child or not. Offenders who've touched children are thus typically regarded as 'actual chomos' or '**chomo** chomos.' There's usually a correlation between the severity of one's sex charge and how... well, how weird they are, as you might imagine. I, an SO myself, am no exception to this rule. I wouldn't have written this glossary if I wasn't a weirdo, c'mon.

- **Cop**

Often refers to ex-police inmates but is also considered synonymous with snitches or cop-fraternizers since they're both known for getting other people in trouble.

- **Diaper sniper**

A rather self-explanatory term usually used in describing toddler-touchers, but some anecdotes have given this term a lot more literal of a meaning with the focus being literally stealing the diapers off of babies or sniffing adult diapers. What a fucking world.

- **Dropout**

Usually refers to ex-gang members who are thus viewed essentially as snitches to said gang(s), regardless of the circumstances that lead to the person no longer affiliating with such. Gangs don't like it when people pull the ol' team-switch on 'em.

- **Feefee**

Prison creativity at its finest, a feefee is an umbrella term for any vaguely cylindrical object of suitable size and rigidity that is then fitted with the necessary... 'additional material'... to make a MacGyver flashlight. Typically made from toilet paper rolls, pill bottles, or just crocheted from scratch, you then take a rubber glove and... I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

- **Fishing**

Most often (but not exclusively) seen in the SHU, where inmates are physically separated in locked cells but not necessarily far apart. Using any battery purchased off of commissary and tied to a length of string for a tether, it can be rolled

under locked cell doors, thrown, or lowered to separate units/tiers in a facility. There, a waiting recipient either attaches what they intend to send to the caster (usually notes, drugs, or even coffee in the SHU), or is delivered such items the same way.

- **Green-lit**

Things get a little gray with this term since it has multiple accepted meanings within different groups. It's primarily used to refer to someone who has been marked for a given action to be taken against them. Inmate-on-inmate, this can be for many reasons including charge, group affiliation, or debts, but usually results in said mark being approached to be... 1) beaten up, 2) raped, 3) shanked, 4) killed by any of the previous three, or 5) told to check in. Chomos, snitches, dropouts, and cops are examples of individuals often green-lit at high-security and/or non-protective yards. The second meaning entails that a certain activity is permitted by the inmates at a given yard, which is referred to as a green-lit yard.

- **Jack shack**

A term used to describe any enclosed space suitable for rubbing one out in privacy. Usually refers to any single-man cell or two-man with only one occupant but can also be extended to include shower and bathroom stalls or bunks with blankets strung up to create a little box. Too bad the blankets don't absorb sound...

- **Jigger/jigging**

When it's time to partake in something that would definitely get you in trouble with a passing guard, such as sexy times in the cell, cooking with prohibited materials, or tattooing, a common practice is having an extra person stand as a lookout to alert the nefarious wrongdoers of incoming guards or prying eyes. This third-wheel is known as the jigger, or he who is jigging. Good jiggers often have a discrete but noticeable noise or hand signal to make as their advanced warning flag, while bad jiggers may just face the wrong way altogether and simply enjoy their front row seats.

- **Kiestering/prison pocket/prison wallet**

It may surprise you to learn that inmates can be quite the anal acrobats, and some have perfected the forbidden skill of using this universal secret compartment for the transportation of contraband. The act of smuggling something by means of one's buttocks is known as kiestering. The Bureau of Prisons has encountered kiestered items frequently enough that strip-searches often include a "squat n' cough" routine, since doing so is meant to cause you to shit whatever may be up there onto the floor (possibly actual shit). Inmates have been known to kiester anything from cell phones, various quantities of drugs, food, and even weapons like shanks or wire (YEOUCH!). After all, it's the one pocket every human comes with.

- **Khaki cop**

Inmates known for trying to boss people around and enforce institution rules like they're in charge despite usually making a complete ass out of themselves in the process, and for running to cry and bitch to an actual cop upon finding themselves in any bad situation. Usually assumed to be snitches by default depending on their level of cop-ness.

- **Locks & socks**

Combination locks are just about the only solid metal object one can buy on commissary, let alone get a hold of period. Shanks present their own logistical challenges that can make constructing and using them risky business, and a pen or pencil, while inconspicuous, doesn't always reliably get the job done. Combination locks circumvent these issues when dropped into a double-knotted sock; it's inconspicuous, easy to make, and will absolutely fuck someone's shit up with a few good swings. Replacing the sock with a laundry loop or belt upgrades it from ghetto-flail to something that should be outlawed by the Geneva convention, leaving wounds that more resemble meteor impacts than blunt trauma.

- **Ninja turtles**

When shit really hits the fan, to the point even the cops need to get in on the ass-kicking, the cheap knock-off version of a riot squad usually gets sent in to divvy out justice, one baton-swing at a time. These riot gear-clad guards are known as the ninja turtles, and they're usually seen running to the SHU.

- **"On the streets"**

The go-to phrase to refer to life and the world outside of prison, and frankly the least cumbersome compared to alternatives like "out in the real world" (because we're not in the Matrix, dumbass) or just "on the outside" since some idiot will think you're talking about recreation. Everyone knows exactly what you're talking about with "on the streets," saving conversation time.

- **P.R.E.A. snacks**

Born from the cheesy and entirely unrealistic rape-prevention videos often shown by counselors at orientation seminars, per the Prison Rape Elimination Act (P.R.E.A.), this refers to the widely perpetuated meme that an aspiring and very hopeful sexual predator will often leave a candy bar (preferably a Payday) on or under the pillow of their possible target with "strings attached" to swindle said person into sexy times. Naturally, it's become a common joke to leave a candy bar under a friend's pillow or shout "PREUH!" when somebody gets handsy in the hall.

- **Punk/bitch**

No, the words themselves are not particularly prevalent in prison, making this something of an outlier, but it's worth mentioning simply due to the fact that, unlike on the streets, these are absolutely without a doubt the most potently

insulting and infuriating things you can call a prisoner. Considered on par with (if not above) accusing one of being a rat or calling them a cop, these words transcend mere badmouthing and instead land straight in 'declaration of war' territory whenever they're uttered with any seriousness. Even joking with these words is essentially playing with a loaded gun, and you can expect shit to be popping off if you suddenly hear someone called a bitch, punk, or worst of all, a punk-ass bitch, in the hallway.

- **Sharking**

For the particularly desperate and/or blatantly perverted, there's sharking. In essence, this involves peeking around partitions at people doing their business at the toilet, urinal, or in the shower. Usually accompanied by intense masturbation or the shark getting called out. Reverse sharking is also possible, in which the one who's sharking is actually the one in the shower or on the toilet looking out at passersby.

- **Shot caller**

Not to be confused with "shock collar" (which it sounds like if you say it too fast). Considered the unofficial field marshals of inmate populations, shot callers are the designated ambassadors or representatives of individual cars, ethnic groups, gangs, etc., who are meant to step in to resolve issues that would arise either within a group or between multiple groups. Naturally considered to be a powerful (and competitive) position to hold, shot callers are usually inmates or 'true convicts' who've earned some real clout, are feared, or just butted their way into the seat because everyone else either didn't care or was too pussy to say anything.

- **"Show me your paperwork"**

A phrase often uttered at non-protective prisons or when someone claims to be a "solid," (see definition) this involves demanding someone retrieve a copy of their personal records that state their charge(s) and hand it over for scrutiny. Alternatively, one may have people on the outside pull someone's record or simply look them up themselves in the law library if their person-of-interest is appealing their case. Regardless of the method, one of several outcomes is possible depending on what the targets charges are and how truthful they are: 1) The person is in on a green-lit charge and lies about it, leading to said person being pummeled and told to check in or just killed outright. 2) The person is in on a green-lit charge and fesses up when questioned, typically resulting in an order to check in or suffer the consequences. Sometimes honesty is the best policy! Finally, 3) the person is **not** a green-lit offender (AKA a "solid") and is a-okay where they are.

- **SHU**

An acronym for Special Housing Unit, also known as the 'shoe,' the hole, the

tank, or 'ad-seg' (administrative segregation) in state facilities. More often than not used as the time-out corner for big bad troublemakers but also for protective custody purposes, preparation for transfers or medical trips, or holdover for higher-security inmates not yet at their final stop or awaiting court. All around, a shitty and claustrophobic place and usually occupied by shitty people. Usually.

- **Smash & go**

Term used to describe when a group of any size, often a racial, ethnic, or gang-related group, decides to take a page out of German wartime doctrine from World War II and execute a Blitzkrieg on another group or range. Typically only one person is targeted, sometimes even at random, except instead of wartime refugees it's a bunch of deranged felons eager to beat somebody up and then leave as fast as possible.

- **Snitch/5K1/rat/walking camera**

Pretty self-explanatory really, these guys are as low on the food chain as one can get, to the point even chomos, dropouts, and sometimes even guards spit in their direction. They told on somebody in order to get reduced punishment or some reward, and/or are known for running to the guards upon witnessing any wrongdoing from someone else to rat them out. Basically human pinatas since beating the shit out of one usually results in people cheering and free stuff for the hit man. Often seen as spineless and unprincipled sellouts or cop-fraternizers.

- **Solid**

An umbrella term for any inmate that is not a snitch, chomo, dropout, or cop, and is typically allowed to live at non-protective custody yards. It's often said however that 'solid' is actually an acronym for 'Sex-Offender Living In Denial,' since the irony is that solids can be the biggest sexual freak-shows of them all. Underage sex-capades? Rape? No problem. Sometimes they're even sex-offenders just not in on a sex-charge **this** time around, hoping nobody finds out. Funny how that works.

- **Sperm surfers**

Term used to describe the rubber shower slides no inmate is ever without in a prison shower. It's a common fact that you don't ever touch the floors while showering. This is due in part to the fact that so many people jerk off in the showers that they're veritable abortion clinics; untold generations upon generations of unborn children have been sacrificed to the bowels of prison plumbing, and, by proxy, the floor of the shower, and just as many will follow. You really think I'm letting that shit touch my bare feet?

- **Stinger**

A legendary device considered by many to be the apex of high-risk/high-reward prison ingenuity (because you will absolutely get in trouble for having it), a stinger is basically a jerry-rigged water boiler or deep-fryer constructed by

jamming wires into a power outlet and running said wires into an electrically conductive medium used for cooking (like water or oil). In classic Hollywood mad-scientist chic, this sometimes comes at the cost of the building's fuses, but the medium itself can even be a bare metal desk or bed platform to make a flat-top grill. Stingers are a prime example of what happens when you lock up a bunch of people with third-world-country building materials and way too much free time on their hands.

- **Waffle stomping**

Another reason to wear those shower slides, some particularly unhinged psychos have been known to evacuate their bowels in the shower (whether this is done in the same session as when they rub one out is still unknown). With actual shit now taking up precious space in that little shower stall, it's up to the bombardier to get it out of there, and the clock is ticking before somebody starts bitching about the smell. Naturally, the drain is the only option, but there's a metal grate in the way that kinda looks like a waffle press... Need I say more?

- **Warden instant-messaging system**

The toilet. Going to take a dump can be declared by stating that you're "gonna go send the warden a message" or are going to "feed the warden."

Congratulations! You've survived the acid trip that is this ridiculous glossary. As a reward for your display of willpower, I've saved this very special word for last - in defiance of the otherwise alphabetized list - since it has multiple, extremely peculiar meanings that are so absurd, and are used in such frequency, that it is simply the epitome of prison linguistic ingenuity, and you've earned the right to behold it. That word is:

- **Deuce**

Definition 1: Shit. Taking a shit can also be called taking a deuce.

Definition 2: Synthetic marijuana (K2, which is prevalent in prison) or just actual marijuana, though from what I hear most of the alleged "good shit" floating around is just paper sprayed with bug killer or oven cleaner. Whatever, it keeps the tweakers out of my room so I don't care. (Usage in a sentence: "You got some deuce, man?")

Definition 3: A departing gesture, usually in some sort of exceedingly dire situation. This is where the plural form of the word comes into play. You hold up two peace signs (or two middle fingers if you wanna be that guy) and declare "deuces!" before making a hasty exit.

Definition 4: A C.O.'s body alarm function. No, I'm not kidding. Triggering the body alarm - and thus triggering a reenactment of that CGI fight scene from The Matrix: Reloaded where Neo fights a hundred Agent Smiths - is referred to as

"hitting the deuces." The reason for this name is that the button on the radio to trigger the alarm is supposedly labeled with a number 2, and like the obnoxious little 4th grade dirt bags we all are, we know number 2 means taking a shit, and right now shit is about to pop off. This definition is so widely accepted in fact that guards have been known to use it in radio communiqué.

Well there you have it, a likely incomplete glossary of actual, genuine prison-slang straight from one such actual prisoner! Unless you're a film screenwriter making a prison flick or some jackass trying to sound street-smart to your friends, I hope this information was not helpful or influential at all to your daily vocabulary, because of it was helpful then I have some concerns. Frankly I hope that you never have to learn these phrases in person, for far too many in the United States already have. In the unlikely event that the fellow inmates who helped me compile this list find themselves reading this, thank you for the approving laughs and neighborly support that helped motivate this into existence.