

In *Jailed*, I unpacked the experience of being housed in a jail unit awaiting bail. Charged with four counts of criminal sale of a controlled substance to an undercover officer, my route was laid out, according to my legal aid society lawyer, Ms. She Had-to-go (It was obvious from our first interaction, where she yelled shut up at me, that she had to go). She had arranged a plea deal for three years; the prosecutors wanted no less than twenty years with no parole.

I did not understand what the charges were. I had serious questions for Ms. She. How could I have done any of that? Why was Ms. She talking about incarceration with such a high number of years? She had a lot to say, but none of it was information; it was directions and orders. When it was my turn to talk, I told her that I would do no time. She told *me* that I had a mental illness. I felt powerful when I fired her. A few days later, I was assigned a pro bono Fifth Avenue attorney, Mr. Smooth Cat (a play on his real name which suits his personality, he charmed his way through the process). When I told him that I would do no time. He said, “Mr. Lonzo, that’s highly unlikely and improbable.”

In the film *Jackie Brown* by Quentin Tarantino, there’s a character named Beaumont, played by the comedian Chris Tucker, who is a low-level associate to a major drug dealer who is being targeted by a major law enforcement operation. In a scene where this drug dealer talks to a bail bondsperson about why he is bailing Beaumont out of jail, he explains that “Beaumont ain’t got a ‘doing time’ kinda disposition.” I thought about Beaumont in those moments when the attorneys present mentioned incarceration, the scene playing in my mind. It made me chuckle every time.

I did no time, however I left the experience with a new label, a societal encumbrance that I carry in my hand and gleefully show the world. I am a felon! Yes, I am a felon. That’s a harsh reality to accept. Felon! What a chilling word! When you hear, see or think about the word, an idea becomes an image, a snapshot, a stereotype embedded somewhere deep in your subconscious. An idea that few people would ascribe to me and when confronted with my pronouncement, the same response rushes out with that same bewildered look, “You’re a felon?”

I keep tossing the word around so that it forces your own ideas around the word “felon,” (see, I did it again), to the forefront of your mind. Let’s unpack and deconstruct this word, together.

It has Old French roots in the word *fel*, describing a wicked or cruel person. Through war and conquest, it made its way into the English legal system through feudal law, a system based on land as currency and service to kings and lords with pledges of loyalty for protection and access to limited rights and resources. In this system, where legal felons were born, breaking your oath of loyalty to a lord was punishable by the return of the land you held in tenancy to the king, the confiscation of your personal possessions, the “staining of your bloodline,” meaning your children could not lay claim to the land or your possessions, and the potential to lose the last piece of your personal property, your life.

Felons were people who had forfeited possessions or land; they were branded by their punishment. If a felon fled, as free movement was not a right to all, they forfeited all rights and were deemed outside of the protections of the law and thus became outlaws. Without protection of the law, outlaws could be killed by anyone. Why might a felon flee if certain death awaited them from anyone they could meet? Before trial by jury, (shout-out to the Magna Carta, 1215), trial by ordeal was the rule of law. There were three trials: trial by combat (knights and lords only), trial by fire (can you walk nine feet with a blessed, hot iron, have your hands bandaged, and three days later have clean and healed hands?) and trial by water (if the water accepts you, you are innocent. Some call that drowning).

Imagine being accused of a serious crime like stealing twelve pence, punishable by forfeiting your life, and your innocence relied on whether or not you survive the ordeal administered by a priest. Interesting fact: more than 60 percent of people accused and put to trial were acquitted; the priests rigged the system. In 1215, the pope pulled priests from trial duty and juries became the fashion. Juries of twelve men became the triers of fact and evidence laid before them. With this, the definition of what constituted a felony grew to include more crimes and therefore punishments. These punishments included branding letters on the body with hot irons that denote the nature of the crime, loss of body parts, or gruesome ways to die. A felon had a distinct look that was obvious to all who saw them because there were visual indicators. Today, the indicators are a created and reinforced fiction of stereotyping centered on certain

Latino and Black males. The idea of what a felon looks like is present throughout pop culture in the form of entertainment and enshrined most especially in youth culture.

Being a felon in modern society can be a constant struggle. While the City of New York supports the formerly incarcerated and people labeled as felons, with laws that bar asking about felony status. However, other socioeconomic factors such as race, educational level, and social status can impact what opportunities you have access to. The aftermath of a felony conviction once you have 'repaid your debt to society' is usually more difficult than the conviction or the time. A lot of doors close.

The story of how my childhood bully became one of my best adult friends' factors largely into my story as a felon. Frank was my childhood bully, who I happened upon one day in my early twenties when I still lived in New Orleans. This chance encounter became a lifelong friendship. I met Frank when he was entering the New Orleans Police Academy, aiming to be an undercover detective, a dream he eventually accomplished as an undercover narcotics detective. You see, Frank was charming and funny. When we were kids, he seemed mean-spirited and funny. Yet as an adult, he smoothed out those rough edges. We used to talk late into the night and early morning about his job as an undercover detective. On occasion, I was even privy to operations when we happened to be near each other. I saw him in action a few times. He was a great actor.

I learned a lot about the mind of an undercover officer. I learned about the culture, information I didn't foresee would be tremendously helpful to me later in my life. When I became a felon, the lessons that I had learned in my numerous conversations with Frank helped me to survive the aftermath. Frank often discussed the role of criminal or confidential informants (CIs) in helping undercover officers find new lines of investigation to make cases. They often targeted low-level offenders and offered them promises of release or leniency in sentencing or reducing charges in exchange for valuable information. Some savvy informants thrived in their criminal activities by supplying undercover officers with a steady stream of information and avoided arrest or jail.

At my first meeting with the assigned prosecutors and my attorney, Mr. Smooth Cat, the prosecutors offered me an interesting deal, they would consider lesser charges and a smaller sentence, *if* I became a confidential informant. When I was alone later with my attorney, he told me, "They think you have information that they can use to make bigger cases." He wanted to employ a strategy of using motions to postpone the court proceedings while we attempted to get a better deal from the prosecutor's office, as they reassigned different prosecutors to cases after a few months. I had no information that I could share to dangle on a leash for their game, but I did have an idea. Could I leverage their gambit against them and avoid incarceration? Could I string them along long enough for my attorney to find a more sympathetic or naïve prosecutor? It was a risky maneuver but I was willing to try it, keeping my idea to myself.

When Frank and his fellow undercover friends talked about their informants, there was an element of pride in cultivating these relationships. The power dynamic was in favor of the officers except on those rare occasions when someone was playing them to eliminate competition. Having a CI "get over on you" or trick an officer into making an arrest on a rival was a mark of embarrassment and open to ridicule from the other undercover officers. Having sympathy for a CI was considered a sign of weakness or poor judgement. As far as all informants were concerned, the group believed that they all lie, they're all poorly educated, and they're all desperate. This thinking allowed more savvy people to manipulate their situations to success. The stories of CIs with colorful names like "Shortbread" or "Crackhead Ronnie" peppered many of the funnier more lively conversations. These anecdotes later served as teachable moments that helped me craft my careful strategy.

The assumption that I was in a desperate situation with multiple possible felonies hanging over my head made me appear vulnerable to the officers that I was assigned to, and also gave me a slight advantage over them. The detectives expected a broken and willing partner flush with actionable information. Newly released from my pre-trial detention, at our first meeting, I appeared weak, tired and frazzled. To them, I was resigned to my fate of having to help them make cases. I tested my persona as a CI and they showed concern for my well-being and postponed any action for a month in order to give me time to recover. When I returned to my apartment after the meeting, I waited until I was inside before I let out a huge laugh. My ruse appeared to be working.

I was a terrible confidential informant. Even though every meeting resulted in nothing actionable, I used those meetings to get to know each officer. I shared little pieces of my life at every meeting. I learned more and more about them and offered advice. I steadily gained their trust and their sympathy all the while playing for time. After almost a year of nothing, a new prosecutor on my case, having talked to the lead detective and my attorney, decided that I had no valuable information and that prosecuting me on multiple felonies did not serve the interests of the state. A new deal was offered, three years of probation on the condition that I pled guilty to one felony count of criminal sale of a controlled substance. Mr. Smooth Cat said something remarkable had happened that made this deal possible, the detectives really liked me and they advocated for probation and no prison time.

I had been swept up in what many continuously arrested and incarcerated individuals refer to as simply “the game”. My discussions with many people affected by the injustice of this system across many states and players in this system confirm that this game is real. The judges, the attorneys on both sides, and the law enforcement agents making the arrest are all aware of this rampant and normalized game. Law enforcement officers identify potential confidential informants based on vulnerability and use them to build cases against other individuals who may in turn offer up more information and this keeps going until someone can’t or won’t provide information and then a conviction is used to justify the entire effort. One low level informant sufficiently coerced with the threat of lengthy incarceration can become a powerful tool of law enforcement. In the wake of these cases, lies destroyed lives.

On many occasions, Frank did not use arrest or the threat of jail to form relationships with his informants. I asked him why once or twice he didn’t arrest someone and he would talk about his ambivalence to ruin someone’s life. He didn’t like the feeling of focusing on “low-hanging fruit”. In the conversations that I had privy to with these law enforcement officers, I saw a humanity in some of their interactions and a cruelty in others. The weight of playing the game over time may have hardened them but it did not extinguish their humanity. This observation guided my own game against the larger one. My victory was not only in avoiding prison but also in offering an opportunity for redemption of the humanity of the people who roped me into this game if only in my situation.

Some felons are seen and treated as irredeemable pariahs despite all the attestation to the contrary. The promises of training and support to prevent recidivism are connected to broken, underfunded programs that are half-baked and run by people providing services with gruff, stern indifference. After my conviction and inside the probation process, I was just a number checking in weekly by automated system. I saw my probation officer, a Latina, who was warm, flexible and open to hear my true and full story. She too was well aware of the game and familiar with my experience. I completed my probation without incident and the challenges of wearing the felon label mildly inconvenienced me.

I was gainfully employed before and after my experience for many years in a lucrative and steady profession. I am a veteran. I come from a background of elite education. The year that I was arrested, I married my longtime partner. I had stable housing and a community of support including my extensive family and loving friends. As fortunate as I am to have these resources, many felons do not. I can forget that I am a felon, which is a privilege. The only negative affect that my felony conviction has afforded me was exclusion from jury service. I have been to the White House as a student travel guide and a felon. I went back to college and received federal financial aid as a felon. I became published as a felon. I mentor many young men of color, as a felon. And I tell anyone who will listen about my journey as a felon.

I own the label felon to disrupt the dangerous narratives and ideas surrounding this word. Every time I shake up or challenge anyone’s notion of what a felon looks like, it is my act of protest and my quest to transform the conversation. Felons are everywhere but the word conjures visions of a particular type of man of color. I have lived with the label of felon now for 12 years, and in those years, a lot has happened. A felon was elected to the White House and not the best representation. A few years ago while reading the news, I came across the name of the detective who arrested me and later lead the team that I was made a confidential informant for. He was arrested for violating the civil rights of scores of people through deceitful behavior. Many of the convictions of the cases that he worked on are in the process of being overturned. Ironically, the man who made me a felon, is now himself, a felon.

References

Lonzo, K. (2025). Jailed!: Observations of the societal structure of a jail housing unit. *The Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies*, 3. <https://journals.calstate.edu/arcjs/article/view/4809>