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LOCAL NEWS



Jailhouse informants have a powerful incentive to help, or hurt, a criminal case: Freedom



Jamison Bell, 43, was a jailhouse informant who testified in two Pinellas murder trials.

By Laura C. Morel, Times Staff Writer

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LARGO – Jamison Bell is a good listener.

In the recreation yard of the Pinellas County Jail, one inmate told him about stabbing a neighbor at a mobile home park. Inside a cell, another confided in Bell that he killed a man who owed him money for cocaine.

Bell was a jailhouse informant who peddled their confessions to prosecutors for a price: a chance to reduce his 15-year federal sentence.

"I just want to receive something for what I did for the state," he wrote to a federal judge in May 2016.

After testifying in two Pinellas murder trials, Bell was released in March – seven years early.

The credibility of jailhouse informants is clouded in skepticism. Studies have shown that informants testified against defendants whose wrongful convictions were later overturned thanks to DNA testing. That's why several states, including Florida, have created safeguards to vet informants as witnesses.

Some informants are especially prolific. Court records detail how Bell assisted prosecutors in several cases. They offer a glimpse into the

complicated role of jailhouse informants.

Pinellas-Pasco Assistant State Attorney Richard Ripplinger, who prosecuted the two murder trials that Bell testified in, said it is a necessary role.

"Some of these crimes don't really happen in front of law-abiding citizens walking their dogs," Ripplinger said. "They happen in front of other criminals, or they make admissions to the criminals that they talk to.

"I still believe what he had to say."

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Bell's latest stint behind bars began in 2009, when the Tampa man was indicted on federal charges of conspiring to distribute cocaine. His criminal history already spanned four drug-related felony convictions by this point. If convicted of this latest charge, he faced up to 27 years in prison.

But after providing federal prosecutors with information about his co-defendant, the U.S. Attorney's Office filed a motion for a "downward departure" — or reduction — of his sentence.

The federal judge granted the motion. Bell pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to distribute narcotics and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

In 2013, Bell was transferred to the Pinellas County Jail, where federal inmates are often held. He was already cooperating with federal prosecutors on a separate drug case.

Ripplinger said he first heard of Bell when his defense attorney called. Bell said he had information about the 2013 first-degree murder case against Sylvester Johnson.

The prosecutor met with Bell at the jail. Bell, according to court records, explained how he met Johnson: As they were escorted to the recreation yard one morning in late 2013, they starting talking. Bell said Johnson told him what happened: At the Palace Mobile Home Park, Johnson crept into another man's trailer in search of cash.

"He had knocked him unconscious and then he had placed the dude in the bed and then he stabbed him so many times," Bell later told the jury in Johnson's 2015 trial.

Ripplinger asked Bell if he had information about any other cases. Bell then brought up Oscar Fowler.

Bell said he met Fowler, who police said killed a St. Petersburg man who was shot 25 times in 2013. They began to chat.

The men talked about spending time at the same federal prison and their mutual acquaintances. Then Fowler started talking about what

happened in 2013, records show. Bell said Fowler told him it started over money.

"He was talking real angry," Bell said in his 2015 deposition. "He told me about the dude he had killed. ... He had to make an example and stuff like that."

Last year, Ripplinger wrote the federal prosecutor in Bell's drug case and noted the informant's cooperation in the two Pinellas cases in state court.

Ripplinger also pointed out that Bell suffered for his cooperation: He was attacked by a group of inmates after word spread he was testifying against Fowler. They struck him with a trash can and kicked him.

"Mr. Bell has always been polite, cooperative and truthful in the prosecutions," Ripplinger wrote. "I believe that he deserves a substantial reduction in his federal sentence."

After one hung jury, Johnson was found guilty of first-degree murder at his 2015 retrial. Following two mistrials, a jury acquitted Fowler in March.

After Fowler's acquittal last month, a federal judge reduced Bell's sentence to seven years. He had also previously received sentence reductions for helping in two other federal cases.

That led to his early release on March 24. Bell, now 43, remains on probation.

He could not be reached for comment. It is unclear where he resides. Messages left with his family and his Facebook account were not returned.

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There are good reasons why an inmate would want to come forward with information that could help prosecutors. One: They're actually telling the truth.

And the second one, said University of Florida law professor Kenneth Nunn, is to "gain the incentive that's dangling out in front of them."

Robert Bloom, a Boston College Law School professor who wrote a book about informants, said that what sets jailhouse snitches apart from other kinds of police informants is the highest incentive possible: freedom.

"The way to get out of jail quicker is to work for Uncle Sam," he said.

But that can also create a perverse incentive.

In 2010, the Florida Supreme Court established the Innocence Commission to identify the causes of wrongful convictions. In a 171-page report, the commission outlined several factors, including false confessions, eyewitness identification and testimony from jailhouse informants. The Florida Supreme Court implemented a recommendation

from the commission in 2014, amending the state's criminal procedures to require that prosecutors disclose informant information to defense attorneys.

State judges also instruct jurors to pay careful attention to the testimony of informants: "While a witness of that kind may be entirely truthful when testifying, you should consider his or her testimony with more caution than the testimony of other witnesses."

Prosecutors say they take precautions when an inmate contacts their office with information. Ripplinger said he asks himself: Are they providing details that haven't been released to the media or in court documents? Does their statement match the other evidence?

If a case has strong forensic evidence, such as DNA or fingerprints, prosecutors may be less inclined to call on a jailhouse informant. Pinellas-Pasco Chief Assistant State Attorney Bruce Bartlett said that's because the defense could use an "anti-snitch" strategy: put another prisoner on the stand to say he overheard the state's witness conspiring against the defendant.

"It just goes on and on and on," Bartlett said. "You end up running around trying a case within a case when you're dealing with those guys."

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