

THE ARGOT OF NUMBER GAMBLING¹

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THE TERM *number gambling* refers to the practice of wagering on the outcome of certain numbers. It embraces a variety of games which differ principally in the way the winning number is determined. The two basic types are 'policy,' in which the winning number is obtained by a drawing, and 'numbers,' in which the winning number is derived from various published statistics.

Number gambling has its chief incidence among Negroes and the lower income levels of other groups. It is commonly referred to as the 'poor man's roulette,' since the minimum wager is ten cents in many of the games; in some instances it is as low as one cent.

Drake and Cayton² in their definitive study of Chicago's Negro community have characterized number gambling as a big business, a cult, and a community institution. This clearly summarizes the significant role which the activity has come to have in the life of the urban Negro. In every respect number gambling is a big business. It has been estimated by some that for the country as a whole an annual intake of a billion dollars is probably conservative. Drake and Cayton estimate that in Chicago in 1938 there were approximately five hundred number banks paying a total of some \$25,000 weekly in wages alone. It is judged that these banks employed over five thousand people and had an annual gross turnover of at least \$18,000,000. It is likely that since that time income and wages have tripled. It goes without saying that a business of this size involves extensive and intricate organization.

The cultist nature of number gambling is readily apparent. In the Negro community 'the numbers' are a perennial topic of conversation. Wherever people congregate one may hear 'number talk.' And frequently comments on the numbers have become the accepted form of greeting. Instead of the customary 'Good morning' or 'How do you do,' we often hear 'What was it?' and the answer '327,' '413,' '875,' or whatever the winning number happens to be. The hold which this activity has on its devotees is shown also in their feverish pursuit of 'lucky numbers' via dream books, lucky incense and potions, spiritualists, numerologists, and confidence men.

1. The material contained in this article is part of a more extensive study by the author of number gambling in several Negro communities.

2. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (New York, 1945).

Number gambling has a firm and, for the most part, accepted place in the Negro community. The 'number kings' generally enjoy high prestige. Many have wide interests in legitimate business and are often generous contributors to community enterprises. The community's acceptance of number gambling is frequently rationalized thus:

You white folks have your stock market. Colored folks got to have our fun too.

Number gambling is really not gambling 'cause you've got a good chance of winning and if you do win you're sure to get your money. That's more than you white folks can say about your gambling.

The numbers is not an evil because the money is spent right in our own community and the bankers are our best charity givers.³

While number gambling as a large-scale racket is of recent growth, some of the games reach back into history. The oldest of the games, and very likely the parent of most contemporary forms, is policy, which is believed to have been in existence in England as early as the first half of the eighteenth century. In the early days policy playing was associated with the regular number lotteries, being a device whereby people unable to afford a regular lottery ticket could wager small amounts on the outcome of the drawing. Later, in America at least, with the passing of the legalized lotteries, policy became an independent game. Because the nature of policy makes it relatively easy to circumvent the antilottery legislation, it has been able to continue in existence. The game referred to as 'numbers' is of recent origin, having its beginning in the middle 1920s in America.

The glossary that follows is fairly exhaustive of the terms which are used in 'number talk.' Some are common to the language of racketeers generally, but for the most part they are unique to the number gambling world. It is interesting to note that some of the jargon has been assimilated into everyday speech. For example, the word *squawk*, which in the argot of the gambler refers to any individual who fails to hit and returns to the confidence man for his money, has come to refer to one who is in the habit of making a commotion over small matters. Similarly, the word *gig*, which to the gambler is a type of play in policy involving three numbers, has in the vernacular of the community become a synonym for the number three. This is illustrated by remarks such as the following: 'How many muffins, sir?' 'A gig will be plenty.'⁴ Or, 'Two strikes, one ball, two down and a gig on base.'⁵

The following terms were collected by the author in the course of an

3. Statements made to the author by members of the Negro community.

4. Overheard by the author in a cafeteria.

5. Overheard by the author at a ball park.

extensive sociological study of number gambling in Detroit's Negro community.

A. M. DRAWING. The morning drawing in policy. Usually takes place at 12 o'clock noon. See *policy*.

BANK. A number gambling organization.

BOLITA. A type of play in numbers where an individual places a wager on the last two digits of the three-digit row. See *numbers*.

BOOK. The same as *bank*.

BOX. A type of play in numbers where an individual wagers on every possible combination of the three-digit number which he selects.

BROTHER ROLL. The fancy 18-39-65. See *fancy*.

CAPITAL SADDLE. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on two numbers to be among the first three drawn.

CATCH, TO. To win.

CHECKER. An individual employed by a number gambling establishment to check the wager slips for winners.

CLEARINGHOUSE. A number game in which the winning number is derived from the daily quotation of money cleared at some local or regional clearinghouse. The term is commonly used to designate all number games whose figures are based on the published quotations of financial organizations.

CLEARWATER ROLL. The fancy 1-2-3.

COME ON CARD. A card or circular used as a means of advertising by a confidence man, numerologist, or gambling establishment. See *confidence man* and *numerologist*.

CONFIDENCE MAN. An individual who specializes in selling numbers to the number-playing public. Such individuals have no connection with the number house but give the impression that they have inside information on what numbers are to appear at a given time.

COVER BANK. A gambling establishment which specializes in insuring the wagers against other banks.

DAY NUMBER. A type of play in policy

in which the individual wagers on a single number to appear in the drawing. See *drawing*.

DOUBLE HOUSE. A policy house in which twenty-four numbers are selected at each drawing. See *house*.

DRAWING. The selection of winning numbers in policy.

DREAM BOOK. A book containing a large number of possible dreams. Each dream has a corresponding number for policy or any one of the other number games.

DREAM NUMBER. A number taken from a dream book or one which has come directly to an individual in a dream.

EDGING OFF. A method of insuring numbers on which there is a heavy wager. See *cover bank*.

ELBOW. The horizontal column of a stovepipe. See *stovepipe*.

FANCY. A specific gig. See *gig*.

FANCY GAL ROLL. The fancy 4-11-44.

FIFTY PERCENT MAN. A writer whose commission is 50 percent of his total collection (the usual commission varies from 10-40 percent). See *writer*.

FIXING. Establishing police protection, usually referred to as 'the fix.'

FLAT. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on two numbers to appear in the drawing.

FLAT GIG. A type of play in policy in which the individual numbers of a gig are wagered upon to appear in specific positions in the drawing.

FOUR-NUMBER PLAY. A variation of the three-digit box play in which a four-digit number is used instead of a three-digit one. The wager is upon any three-digit combination that can be derived from the four numbers. See *box*.

GAL ROLL. The fancy 5-9-55.

GIG. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on three numbers to appear in the drawing. This is the most common type of play in policy.

GIGS-HORSE. A type of play in policy in which the player selects four numbers and wagers on any three of them to appear in the drawing.

GOOD LUCK OIL. An oil believed to bring good luck in number gambling if applied to hands, face, or clothing.

HIT. Same as *catch*.

HOLY OIL. Same as *good luck oil*.

HORSE. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on four numbers to appear in the drawing.

HOT NUMBER. A number that is being heavily played by the public.

HOUSE. Same as *bank*.

ICE. The money paid for police and political protection.

INFO. Information.

JACK. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on five numbers to appear in the drawing.

KENTUCKY LOTTERY. A term for policy in some sections of the country. The term was more widely used at an earlier time.

KICKBACK. Same as *ice*.

LAY DOWN CARD. Same as *come on card*.

LOUISIANA LOTTERY. See *Kentucky lottery*.

LUCKY INCENSE. An incense which when burned is believed to bring good luck to the number player. In some kinds of good luck incense the number appears in the ashes.

MAGIC GIG. Same as *fancy gal roll*.

MOVING ROLL. The fancy 9-19-29.

NIGGER BABY ROLL. The fancy 13-32-50.

NIGGER POOL. A term used in some sections of the country to designate all types of number game. In some places it refers specifically to the 'numbers' game. See *numbers*.

NIGHT NUMBER. A number game in which the range of numbers is from 111 to 999. The winning number is determined by throwing dice or by drawing a number from a container. The number is not made public before 10:30 P.M.

NUMBERS. A game in which the player selects for wager some three-digit num-

ber within the range of 000 to 999. The winning number is derived from various published figures of stock exchanges, bond markets, clearinghouses, or race tracks. The particular digits selected as the winning number vary from place to place.

NUMEROLOGIST. An individual who specializes in selling numbers to the number-playing public. He differs from a confidence man in that he does not profess to be on the 'inside' but claims to have solved the mystery of numbers and devised a 'system.'

ONE-LEGGED BOOK. A policy house in which twelve numbers are selected at each drawing.

ONE-LEGGED MAN. Same as *one-legged book*.

ONE-NUMBER PLAY. A type of play in numbers where an individual places a wager on the first, middle, or last digit of the three-digit row.

ONE-TWO-THREE MUTUELS. A number game in which the winning number is derived from the win, place, and show columns of the first, second, and third races. See *race mutuels*.

ON THE NOSE. Playing a number without variations.

OPERATOR. An employee of a policy house who conducts the drawing. The term is frequently used also for an individual who owns a number gambling establishment.

OVERLOOK MAN. The bouncer in a number gambling establishment.

PAY OFF. The payment of winning wagers by the gambling establishment.

PAY OFF EDITION. The edition of a newspaper which contains the statistics used in the numbers game.

PICKUP MAN. A person who collects the money taken in by the writers and delivers it to the headquarters of the organization. See *writer*.

PIPE. The vertical column of a stovepipe.

P. M. DRAWING. The afternoon drawing in policy. Usually takes place at 4 P.M.

POLICY. A number game in which players wager on numbers within a range of 1-78. Winning wagers are determined by

a drawing. Capsules or balls numbered from 1 to 78 are placed in a container. From these twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-six numbers are drawn depending on the type of house.

POLICY SLIP. A slip of paper on which the results of the drawing are printed.

PULLING TIME. The time of the drawing in policy.

RACE MUTUELS. A number game in which the winning number is derived from the racing results of any well-known race track.

RATE CARD. Cards distributed by gambling establishments on which are printed the odds paid on the various games and on the various types of play.

RUNNER. A person who solicits wagers for a number gambling establishment.

SADDLE. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on any two numbers of a gig as well as on the gig itself.

SADDLING A GIG. Same as *saddle*.

SHAKE DOWN. Extortion.

SIDE. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on two numbers to appear consecutively in the drawing.

SINGLE HOUSE. Same as *one-legged book*.

SQUAWK. A person who returns to a confidence man for his money after he has failed to win on a number sold to him. Numbers are frequently sold with a money-back guarantee.

SQUAWK MAN. A person employed by a confidence man to get rid of squawks without returning their money.

STATION NUMBER. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on a single number to appear in a specific position in the drawing, i.e., first, second, etc.

STATION SADDLE. A type of play in policy in which the individual wagers on two numbers to appear at specified places in the drawing.

STORE-FRONT CHURCH. A pseudo-religious organization housed in a va-

cated store building. Among other things it gives out numbers to be played in the various number games.

STOVEPIPE. A type of play in policy in which two numbers are chosen to represent a horizontal column and a series of numbers (usually eight) to represent a vertical column. To win in this type of play the two numbers of the horizontal column must appear in the drawing with any one of the numbers in the vertical column.

STRAIGHT PLAY. Same as *on the nose*.

SURING OFF. Same as *edging off*.

TAKE. The total amount of money collected by an establishment for each drawing in policy or for each day in numbers.

TEST MESSAGE. A message containing numbers. Given out by a medium or spiritualist in a store-front church.

THREE-FIVE-SEVEN MUTUELS. A number game where the winning number is derived from the sum of the first three, first five, and first seven races.

THREE-LEGGED BOOK. A policy house in which thirty-six numbers are selected at each drawing.

TICKET. Ordinarily the slip upon which the winning numbers are printed in any of the number games. Occasionally it is used as a synonym for *bank*, *house*, or *wheel*.

TIP SHEET. A circular giving tips on numbers to the player. In most cases they are weekly publications and are sold at newsstands, drugstores, and smoke shops.

TRIPLE HOUSE. Same as *three-legged book*.

TWO-LEGGED BOOK. Same as *double house*.

WALKING WRITER. Same as *runner*.

WASHWOMAN'S GIG. Same as *fancy gal roll*.

WELSHING. Failure on the part of a house to pay off.

WHEEL. Same as *bank*.

WHITE POLICEMAN ROLL. The fancy 13-37-70.

WRITER. Same as *runner*.