



## Using Person First Language in Media Communications

### *Communications Toolkit*

Our criminal justice system must keep all communities safe, and uphold the values of fairness, equal justice, respect and accountability. But, the fact remains that our system is falling woefully short of those values, and with devastating consequences. People of color – particularly Native American, black, and Latino people – have felt the devastating impact of discrimination within the criminal justice system, including the loss of employment, housing and, in many cases, even death.

Research and experience have shown that the current vocabulary around criminal justice often perpetuates misconceptions, reinforces stereotypes, and hampers improvement of the system. To confront this, we must recognize the basic humanity of the people caught within the criminal justice system, by using **person-first language** that affords them with the respect and the human dignity they deserve.

This toolkit contains suggested strategies that center and uplift person-first language in a way that is more respectful and effective at advancing criminal justice reform.

### **#1: People, Not Labels**

The traditional language of the criminal justice system is often dehumanizing and fosters stigma, stereotypes, and fear. Instead of labels, talk about the people touched by the system. They are real. They are members of our community and country.

By using labeling language such as “inmate” and “offender,” we immediately ascribe the worst of society to a person based solely on having been incarcerated, erasing their humanity. Simply put, we must begin by defining all people within the criminal justice system as people, and not as coded, fear-based labels. Regardless of anyone's best intentions, we must understand the impact and harm in our words. Here some other options:

Instead of	Try
<b>Felons</b>	People convicted of felonies
<b>Criminals, Convicts</b>	People convicted of crimes
<b>Inmates</b>	People in jail
<b>Prisoners</b>	Incarcerated people
<b>Ex-Con</b>	Formerly incarcerated person
<b>Defendants</b>	People accused of a crime

We recognize that these words might take up more space in a news story, but when we no longer define someone as "Other," we shift culture and policies toward human rights and dignity.

## #2: Obstacles Before Outcomes

Instead of jumping straight to outcomes, take the time to explain the inequitable treatment that lead to those outcomes. Otherwise, audiences will inaccurately assume that unequal outcomes happen because some groups are simply more prone to crime.

Instead of	Try
Racial disparities	Obstacles to equal justice, racial profiling, unconscious bias

## #3: Break Stereotypes

Tired, old language about communities and crime tends to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and drive flawed and misdirected policy. For more accuracy, consider using language that respects communities and acknowledges the disinvestment within neighborhoods and groups.

Instead of	Try
Dangerous neighborhood, "sketchy" neighborhoods	Communities experiencing high levels of violence
Minorities	People of color

## #4: Foster New Thinking and Innovative Approaches

Repeating old tropes and phrases tends to reinforce outdated thinking about the justice system, and the people within it. Consider fresh ways of talking about the system that promote the values the system should represent.

Instead of	Try
Punish crime	Prevent harm, promote community safety

“Law and order”	Accountability, Restoration, Due Process, Equal Justice
War on Crime/Drugs/Poverty	Prevention, Solutions and Alternatives, Drug Treatment
Tough on Crime	Smart and appropriate responses

## **#5: Context is Key**

The fact remains that not everyone who is arrested is guilty of an offense; stories of exonerated people are numerous in the United States and growing.

As communicators, we owe it to our audiences to think careful how we portray people, and to be mindful of the fact that, when it comes to criminal justice narratives, much of our information comes from one source. Indeed, we need to be equally aggressive in telling stories of improper conduct and abuse by law enforcement.

We must all commit to using terms such as "formerly incarcerated or incarcerated person" or "person with a felony conviction" instead of "ex-con," "felon," or "inmate." By doing so we make a conscious effort to recognize and respect people's humanity. To do otherwise only reinforces the second-class status we relegate upon many people in this country and therefore stalls our efforts toward equal justice for all.