

People

First

Language

Guide

Why *people* first?

Words matter

When audiences read and hear words like “felon” and “inmate” they are more afraid of, less open to, less curious about, and less supportive of people with experiences like mine and the opportunities that would make me most safe and free.

Norris Henderson

Founder and Executive Director

Voice of the Experienced and Voters Organized to Educate

There is more [reporting](#) on the harms of [mass incarceration](#) and [mass criminalization](#) than ever before. Journalists across the country are doggedly covering [police violence](#), [judicial overreach](#), and [prison conditions](#). Entire journalism outlets are dedicated to critically tracking the criminal justice system. Each article is an important step in helping the public understand these complex, harmful systems.

Despite this progress, the vast majority of news outlets continue to default to the use of dehumanizing labels such as “inmate,” “offender,” and “felon” in their reporting. Even when journalists aim to shine a light on injustice or expose abuses of power in the criminal justice system, they inadvertently legitimize that very system when they use these terms to describe the subjects of their stories.

People who are or were incarcerated have long [called on the press](#) to stop using dehumanizing labels. Our [research](#) at FWD.us shows that these terms are still extremely common and that, far from being neutral descriptors, they bias readers and viewers against directly impacted people and criminal justice reform.

If you haven't read the study, here's a quick summary of what we found. Respondents to [two nationally representative surveys](#) were asked which words they associated with various phrases. When presented with the term “person with a felony conviction,” 50% of respondents chose a positive or neutral word, and half chose a negative word. “Felon” elicited a very different response, with more than two out of three respondents expressing a negative association.



Similarly, support for policies like allowing people with felony convictions to vote or shortening some prison sentences was evenly split among survey respondents exposed to articles using people-first language like “people with a felony conviction.” Support for those policies was much lower among people exposed to articles using labels like “felons” or “habitual offenders.”

Failing to use people-first language perpetuates false and dangerous stereotypes, artificially inflates support for mass incarceration, and dampens the impact of important critiques of the criminal justice system. These labels permanently define people based on what is often the worst and lowest moment of their lives. Moreover, these terms are frequently used inaccurately and fail to correctly or completely convey the relevant information about a story and the individuals involved. For example, the term “violent offender” is often used for behavior that most people wouldn’t classify as “violent” such as [embezzlement or selling drugs](#).

An evolution in language is necessary and long overdue—but the shift is happening. In a welcome and encouraging step, the most recent edition of [the Associated Press Stylebook](#) contains a new chapter on criminal justice. The chapter includes guidance to use person-first language to describe people who are convicted of crimes, incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated. This change has been decades in the making, building off the [groundbreaking work](#) of people directly impacted by incarceration, the critical leadership by journalism organizations such as [the Marshall Project](#), [Vox](#), and [Poynter](#), as well as FWD.us’ own [research](#) on the harm caused by dehumanizing labels.

This change from the Associated Press is an important step, but there’s still more work to do. It’s time for the media to drop all dehumanizing labels from their reporting. This guide offers a long list of alternate terms journalists can use when reporting about people affected by the criminal justice system, some general tips, and an updated list of the many excellent resources available to support journalists interested in changing their language choices.

Recommendations for *People First* Reporting

While making the shift to people-first language can seem daunting, it is actually fairly straightforward: avoid dehumanizing labels and tropes that don't help the reader or listener deepen their understanding of the person or the systems at play.

This goes beyond just avoiding the use of terms like “inmate” or “felon.” When reporting about incarceration, there is often no journalistic benefit to mentioning what crime someone has been charged with or convicted of unless it is directly relevant to the story. Prior convictions should only be used to deepen readers' and viewers' understanding of how or why an event has happened. And even then, journalists should situate those convictions in the context of what we know after more than 30 years of mass incarceration. Here are just a few findings that might be relevant to reporting on the criminal justice system:

- The criminal justice system disproportionately impacts people of color—particularly Black and indigenous people—and poor people. The color of a person's skin and the amount of money in their bank account have a significant impact on whether they will be arrested, charged, convicted, and imprisoned.
- Years of research – both lived and academic – have proven that prison sentences do not deter crime. The scholarship is so conclusive that researchers have posited that it should be considered settled fact in the field.
- While they are not tracked in the same way, crimes are also committed inside prisons and jails. Incarcerating people doesn't necessarily reduce the total amount of harm happening to people; it temporarily shifts where it occurs.
- Not all harmful behavior is criminalized. The crimes tracked by police receive the most news coverage, but many activities that significantly impact public safety are often handled in the civil legal system (for example, wage theft and workplace safety violations) or are not against the law at all (for example, air and water pollution).

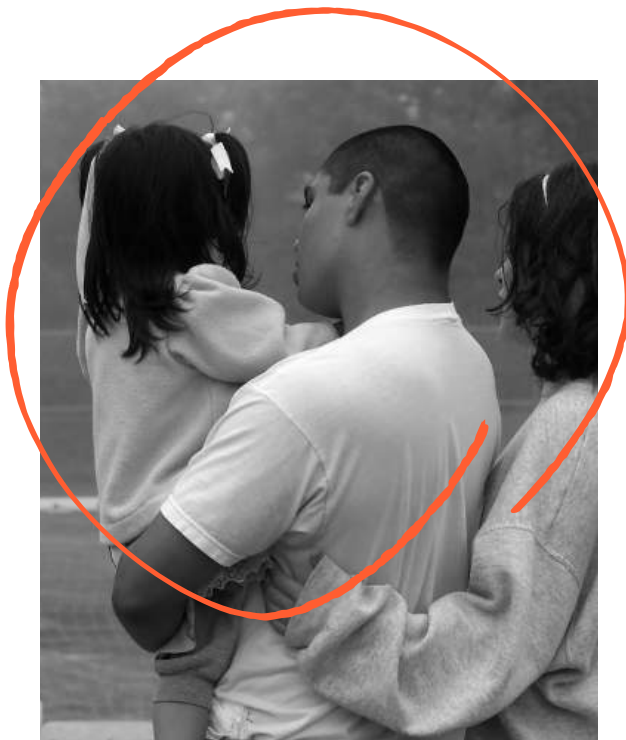
General language recommendations

- Instead of describing someone's relationship to the system (e.g. "felon," "inmate," "convict," etc.), refer to the person as a person, a man, a woman, a child, etc. You can also refer to another aspect of their identity, such as a mother, accountant, neighbor, etc. Whenever possible, use the person's name.

- Take care with other labels commonly used in the criminal justice system, like "violent"/"nonviolent" or "felony"/"misdemeanor." Many crimes classified as "violent" don't involve any physical force (e.g. possessing the ingredients to make methamphetamine, embezzlement, selling drugs near a playground, etc.). Similarly, the distinction between a misdemeanor and a felony is inconsistent from state to state and is not a definitive marker of severity. If you determine it's necessary to mention the crime someone was charged with or convicted of, be specific and use plain language rather than relying on language that can obscure or mislead.

- This point is best illustrated with an example. The following three descriptions could all be used for the same crime in New York: 1) a violent felony, 2) felony second degree burglary, and 3) stealing a package from a building lobby. Which gives your audience the most accurate sense of what happened?

- Avoid passive voice (e.g. "officer involved shooting") when describing the actions of state actors. Stick to active sentence structure that allows people to understand who did what to whom.



Substitutes for harmful terms

In addition to the general tips above, below are some words or phrases to avoid and more neutral substitutes to use instead when reporting on people affected by the criminal justice system. This list is by no means comprehensive, but it does aim to offer alternatives for a wide range of terms, including those that were found to bias readers and viewers in the People First research project.

Words/ phrases to avoid	Instead use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felon • Ex- Felon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person convicted of a felony • Person with a felony conviction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convict • Ex-Convict • Criminal • Offender • Perpetrator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person convicted of a crime • Person with a conviction • Person with a criminal record
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inmate • Prisoner* • Ex-Prisoner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in jail/prison • Incarcerated person • Imprisoned person • Formerly incarcerated person • Person who has been incarcerated <p><small>*Note: the term 'political prisoner' can be an acceptable use of 'prisoner'</small></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent offender • Sex offender • Drug offender • Labeling person by an offense like "shoplifter or "murderer" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person accused of X • Person arrested for X • Person charged with X • Person convicted of X • Person imprisoned for X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parolee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person on parole • Person home on parole • Person on supervision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probationer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person on probation • Person on supervision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detainee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person in jail • Person in pretrial detention • Person held in custody

Substitutes for harmful terms contd.

Words/ phrases to avoid	Instead use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juvenile delinquent • Juvenile offender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person with an arrest / charge / conviction • Youth • Minor • Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat offender • Career criminal • Habitual offender • Recidivist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with multiple convictions • Person with prior convictions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal alien 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigrant • Undocumented person <p><small>*Note: For immigrants without a permanent status but temporary protections, say “person with DACA/temporary protected status/ etc.” Similarly, someone seeking asylum should be referred to as “person seeking asylum.”</small></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspect • Arrestee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person accused of X • Person under investigation / being investigated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As an inmate” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While incarcerated / imprisoned / detained • During their time in jail /prison / custody

Examples of adjusted language

If the original language reads

- ✗ Court rules some **felons** can now apply to have their records sealed.
- ✗ Bill could lead to shorter sentences for some **habitual offenders**.
- ✗ New Recovery Court program offers **drug offenders** treatment instead of jail.
- ✗ 2,258 **inmates** to be released from state prisons in a single day.

Instead try

- ✓ Court rules that some **people with felony convictions** can now apply to have their records sealed.
- ✓ Bill could lead to shorter sentences for some **people with prior convictions**.
- ✓ New Recovery Court program offers **people convicted of some drug offenses** treatment instead of jail.
- ✓ 2,258 **people** to be released from state prisons in a single day.



Additional *resources*

There are many excellent resources available to journalists and members of the media on covering the criminal justice system. Below are some additional guides and clips for further reading.



Language and criminal justice reporting guides

- Just Leadership USA: [Using Person First Language in Media Communications](#)
- LAist: Dialogue: [Style Guide on Criminal Justice Reporting](#)
- The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions: [An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language](#)
- The Fortune Society: [Words Matter Guide](#)
- The Opportunity Agenda: [Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide](#)
- The Osborne Association: [Resources for Humanizing Language](#)
- The Marshall Project: [The Language Project](#)
- The Sentencing Project: [Media Guide: 10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don'ts](#)
- Underground Scholars Initiative: [Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System](#)
- Vox Media: [Language, Please](#)
- The Center for Just Journalism: [Building a Better Beat](#)

Additional *resources* contd.

Clips for further reading

- Columbia Journalism Review (May 2020): [2020 AP Stylebook Changes: Person-First Language](#)
- Prism (July 2021): [As more media adopt 'person-first' language for incarcerated people, advocates say that's just a start](#)
- The Atlantic (June 2020): [The Headlines That Are Covering Up Police Violence](#)
- The Hill (June 2019): [Language matters for justice reform](#)
- The New York Times (May 2016): [Labels Like 'Felon' Are an Unfair Life Sentence](#)
- The Urban Institute (May 2021): [Person-First Language is Not Enough](#)
- The Washington Post (August 2021): [How the language of criminal justice inflicts lasting harm](#)
- The Washington Post (May 2016): [Guest Post: Justice Dept. agency to alter its terminology for released convicts, to ease reentry](#)
- The Washington Post (May 2016): [Pennsylvania Dept. of Corrections to discard terms 'offender,' 'felon' in describing ex-prisoners](#)

About FWD.us

[FWD.us](#) is a bipartisan organization focused on criminal justice and immigration reform. We work to engage, educate, and mobilize key constituencies across the political spectrum to grow and galvanize support for meaningful reforms. FWD.us also conducts research on topics relevant to criminal justice reform, such as our [People First report](#).

About The Center for Just Journalism

[The Center for Just Journalism](#) promotes journalistic practices that enhance public understanding of safety. The Center connects journalists with information and experts on crime and criminal legal issues, and supports newsrooms engaged in rethinking their public safety coverage.