



A HUMANIZING TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

As a community, we have a responsibility to break stereotypes by using language that humanizes people impacted by the criminal legal system. IL-CHEP has compiled a list of terms that replace oppressive institutional terminology with empowering and uplifting language.

Words That Stigmatize

Offender, inmate, felon, criminal, convict, prisoner, ex-offender, ex-con, ex-prisoner, parolee, probationer, detainee, juvenile offender, juvenile delinquent, sex offender, mentally ill, homeless, addict, or substance abuser.¹

These words present a significant barrier to reintegration.¹

Federal officials are working to change that lexicon so that people who have committed crimes have a better chance of being seen as human beings worthy of being back in society.¹

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS GUIDE

Incarcerated Person: A person confined to a jail or prison.

This term makes no claim about guilt or innocence (contrary to words like “convict”), nor does it attach a permanent identity to an often-temporary status (like “prisoner” etc.)²

Formerly Incarcerated Person: A person who has been in a carceral setting. Examples of carceral settings are prisons, immigration detention centers, local jails, and juvenile detention centers.²

System Impacted: Any person directly or indirectly impacted by incarceration.

Direct Impact: Arrest, conviction.

Indirect Impact: No arrest, no conviction, no incarceration; partners, parents, children, and/or siblings who experience significant disadvantages because a loved one is incarcerated.²

Carceral System: A comprehensive network of systems that rely, at least in part, on the exercise of state-sanctioned physical, emotional, spatial, economic, and political violence to preserve the interests of the state.”²

People Convicted of Drug Violations/Violent Offenses instead of “Violent offenders” or “Drug offenders,” etc.²

Person on Parole/Probation instead of “parolee” or “probationer.”²

Undocumented People: People engaged in the asylum, DACA, etc. process, however, the process is not complete to the point of providing guaranteed citizenship. A person born in a different country who is living in the U.S. without legal permission.²

Person first-person language: Articulating the person first, not whatever temporary or circumstantial qualifiers may be perceived.²

Rehabilitation: The act of helping people desist from criminal behavior through therapeutic programs, activities, incentives, substance use treatment, and other services designated to change behavior.³

Age-Crime Curve: Often referred to as “aging out of crime” indicates that the probability of committing a crime decreases as a person gets older.³

Specific Deterrence: The idea that punishment will dissuade a person from committing future crimes.³

Time served: The amount of time a person spends in prison as distinct from the judicial sentence.³

Incapacitation: Prevention of future crime from a person who is believed to likely commit the crime if they were not removed from society.³

Systemic Change: Disruption of standard practices; meaningful inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making; redefining the mission and vision of justice institutions and employees; divorcing the stigma attached to justice involvement in ways that empower others; and structurally incentivizing these changes.¹

PREFERRED HUMANIZING LANGUAGE

S/he, they (are) is a person with justice involvement.¹

S/he, they (have) has a history of justice involvement; s/he they (are) is formerly incarcerated.¹

S/he they (are) is under judicial supervision.¹

S/he they (are) is a young justice-involved person.¹

S/he they (have) has a mental illness; s/he they (have) has a mental health condition.¹

S/he they (are) is experiencing homelessness.¹

S/he they (have) has used substances in the past; s/he they currently use substances.¹

¹ Society, The Fortune. *Words Matter: Using Humanizing Language*. Long Island City, n.d.

² Cerda-Jara, M., Czifra, S., Galindo, A., Mason, J., Ricks, C., & Zohrabi, A. (2019). Language guide for communicating about those involved in the carceral system. *Berkeley, CA: Underground Scholars Initiative, UC Berkeley*.

³ Bhati, A. (2023). The Public Safety Impact of Shortening Lengthy Prison Terms. Council on Criminal Justice. <https://counciloncj.foleon.com/tfls/long-sentences-by-the-numbers/the-public-safety-impact-of-shortening-lengthy-prison-terms>