

## Person-First Language

The use of “person-first language”—for example, saying “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person”—became prevalent in the 1970s in both the medical and mental health fields. The goal was to reduce labeling and stigmatizing language by shifting the focus from a person’s traits, actions, or behaviors to their humanity. Since then, person-first language has expanded to numerous other areas, including the justice system.<sup>1</sup>

### The Impacts of Person-First Language

**WORDS HAVE POWER**, and the way a person is referenced can have an impact on their psychological well-being and behavior, on an organization’s or system’s actions, and on society’s views and treatment.

The labeling theory introduced in the 1960s discusses how a person’s self-identity and behavior are influenced by language that is used to classify or describe them. Justice system labels are often associated with stigma and shame. They are dehumanizing. They account for only the past: a person is defined by a single experience instead of as someone who has a complex identity and who can change. These negative labels impact a person’s self-efficacy, or their belief that they can chart a different course for themselves. A shift toward person-first language can not only reduce shame and stigma but also increase a person’s confidence in their ability to achieve successful outcomes.

Using person-first language can also change the way organizations or systems interact with those in their care. For justice system professionals, this means recognizing that people involved in the justice system have the capacity to adopt prosocial, law-abiding behaviors and contribute positively to the communities in which they live.

For a person’s family and society in general, the use of humanizing language can increase their likelihood of seeing the person impacted by the justice system as someone who can change and of giving that person a “second chance.” This can ease the reintegration process, allowing the person to build stronger social networks and bonds, improve access to housing, and increase employability—all associated with increased law-abiding behaviors.

“We are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners, and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as ‘things’ rather than people.”

—Eddie Ellis

### Changing Terminology

**IT IS ESSENTIAL** that justice system leaders who want to create impactful change evaluate the terminology used in both internal and external communications (e.g., in policies and procedures, in memos and press releases, on their website, in training materials, at staff meetings, in one-on-one appointments and group programs). ►

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the use of person-first language in the justice system, see, for example, <https://fortunesociety.org/wordsmatter> and <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-first-changing-way-we-talk-about-those-touched-criminal-justice-system>.

“ If you can’t see me as [a] human being, then you will never treat me as a human being. And I can never escape the parameters of the system. ”  
 –Jerome R. Wright

The Pennsylvania Partnership for Criminal Justice Improvement has developed a communications toolkit that includes a glossary of recommended terminology.<sup>2</sup> Agencies are encouraged to refer to this glossary, a sample of which appears below (with some updated terms), and to continue adapting their language as new preferred terms emerge or to reflect their unique needs.

INSTEAD OF...	USE...
<b>Defendant</b>	<b>Person arrested for/accused of/charged with &lt;&lt;list law violation&gt;&gt;</b>
<b>Detainee</b>	<b>Person detained in jail/prison</b>
<b>Criminal, offender, perpetrator, perp</b>	<b>Person convicted of a crime</b>
<b>Felon</b>	<b>Person convicted of a felony</b>
<b>Misdemeanant</b>	<b>Person convicted of a misdemeanor</b>
<b>Violent offender</b>	<b>Person convicted of a violent act</b>
<b>Nonviolent offender</b>	<b>Person convicted of a nonviolent act</b>
<b>Sex offender</b>	<b>Person convicted of a sex offense, person with a sex offense conviction</b>
<b>Inmate, prisoner</b>	<b>Person in jail/prison</b>
<b>Parolee</b>	<b>Person on parole, person under judicial supervision, person under supervision</b>
<b>Probationer</b>	<b>Person on probation, person under judicial supervision, person under supervision</b>
<b>Ex-inmate</b>	<b>Person who is reentering/rejoining the community, returning citizen, person who was incarcerated</b>
<b>Ex-offender, former offender, ex-con</b>	<b>Person who was justice-involved, person who was system-involved, person with prior justice system involvement, person with lived experience, person who has experienced community supervision</b>

Often, the context is sufficient to understand that a person has or has had justice system involvement. In these instances, the term “person” should be used on its own.

## One Step

**CHANGING LANGUAGE** is only part of adopting a more humanizing approach. As TaLisa J. Carter, an affiliated scholar at the Urban Institute, states, “Although the shift to person-first language is a critical step, it should not be the goal. The goal is systemic change that creates equitable outcomes for all people. Systemic change in the criminal justice system involves altering institutional policies, practices, and cultures to eliminate disparate outcomes based on race, ethnicity, gender, ability, history of incarceration, and other marginalized identities...Words must come with action.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://rest.edit.site/filestorage-api-service/459aef2bbfb8957b03b9a0e0f23d8280/ppcji-communications-toolkit.pdf?dl=1>.

<sup>3</sup> Carter, T. J. (2021). *Person-first language is not enough*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/person-first-language-not-enough>