



ATLCOMMUNITYSUPPORT.ORG

Language & Style

The Atlanta Community Support Project (ACSP) regards each person as the valuable, autonomous individual they are and, out of respect for ourselves and each other, adopts this living document as our guidepost for thinking about the ways we talk and write, as a team and in public-facing communications.



The Atlanta Community Support Project works at the intersection of poverty and incarceration, empowering those of us affected to tear down the cultural and legal barriers that stigmatize us. We do this by conducting ongoing research, making policy recommendations, and providing those navigating homelessness and reentry the tools needed to advocate for ourselves and each other and to engage civically.

For more information, or to join our community, visit atlcommunitysupport.org/connect

SEE, HERE’S THE PROBLEM

We live in a culture that teaches us to other. The othering happens not just in the ways individuals and groups are discriminated against, through policies and social ‘norms,’ but in the way we regard each other – the way we talk about each other.

As people impacted by the criminal system, we know what othering feels like. We know how offensive, dehumanizing words land. Those words have been used to degrade us personally, in specific, traumatic instances, by system actors, agents of the PIC who either knew what they were doing or had no clue, but were willing to play their part in an oppressive system regardless.

As legal and policy folks, we recognize the law has been used for centuries to codify blatant discrimination, intentionally assigning stigma to certain groups. This stigma is reinforced by cultural narratives depicting us in negative lights. By using dehumanizing terminology, the speaker/writer actively perpetuates racist and class-based oppression.

RULE OF THUMB

When you’re getting hung up on terminology, ask yourself: ***Is it a word the person chose for themselves?*** If the answer is no, a system chose that label for the person, to other them, don’t use it. You wouldn’t be offended if someone called you a parent, artist, lawyer, student, or advocate – roles you selected for yourself. But you might be offended if someone called you a slob, divorcee, or a Negative Nancy.



Solutions

Keep having conversations

Eddie Ellis's [Open Letter](#) to Our Friends eloquently emphasized the importance of person-first language when few were talking about it, and his letter is still a perfect place to start.

The ACSP understands that though the use of dehumanizing terminology actively perpetuates racist and class-based oppression, people use those words because they're part of our social vocabulary. We use words without knowing the origins, without understanding the harm or why they are offensive. We have all used these words at some point. We must give each other grace and stay willing to have ongoing conversations, because just like learning a new language, unlearning bad habits won't happen overnight.

Control your narrative

Many of us, especially after release, are eager to get our stories out. But giving reporters who don't care about our humanity leeway to say what they want could not only mean further traumatizing and stigmatizing ourselves, but other people, too. Before you agree to talk to a reporter, consider a few things:

- ★ **You hold all the cards.** You have something they want, and you don't have to share it. It's your life and your story.
- ★ Make the reporter agree to your **depiction restrictions**. Only you can decide what those are, but the Atlanta Community Support Project offers [some examples](#) of what we use.
 - ✦ Talk to the reporter on **background**, or **off-the-record**, while you're hashing out the parameters of their interview with you.
 - ✦ Get their agreements **in writing**, even if that's an email or a text message.
- ★ Insist on using a **pseudonym** if it'll prevent retaliation or further stigma. This is not the reporter's decision. They know you're the source and that's sufficient.

Inevitably, reporters will argue with you over language usage. But when they start giving excuses, be prepared to push back with some common sense responses:

EXCUSE	RESPONSE
<i>I'm just doing what my editors tell me to do.</i>	<i>You don't have any creative control over your own stories? Did you tell them I wouldn't talk to you unless you agreed to my depiction restrictions?</i>
<i>We follow the AP Stylebook.</i>	<i>Many reputable news outlets don't follow the AP on this because it's unethical. Does your publication have a house style guide? Do you know the AP is considering changing their position on this in the next edition?</i>
<i>I have a word count limit; "inmate" is much shorter than "woman incarcerated at..."</i>	<i>Well if you really want to save space, just say "woman." We already know the story, and your reporting, is about prison, yet you go out of your way every time to reiterate over and over that the people are incarcerated.</i>
<i>Well, what am I supposed to call you?</i>	Person is fine.

Boycott bad journalism

Though some reporters do get it right, many out there are still giving excuses for using offensive language and engaging in bad practices when it comes to covering the criminal system. We all know the press likes to publish 'crime stories' because they're salacious, but at what cost?

When people are dying because of medical negligence or poor conditions, it's important that those issues get coverage. But if the reporter calls people "inmates," "offenders," or "prisoners," all they're actually doing is supporting the system's position - that says it's okay for the state to treat people like they are less than human. Also, when a story is about prison conditions, mentioning info completely irrelevant to the topic, like the crime someone was convicted of, goes directly against journalistic principles.

News outlets want us to consider them legit, but they practice bad journalism. As consumers, it's our job to point out these blatant hypocrisies. Leave a public comment at the bottom of the article. Write to the reporter directly and let them know their words are offensive and counterproductive, especially if their purported goal is to draw attention to these issues. Write to the Associated Press and ask them *when* they're finally going to give journalists some guidance on not using dehumanizing language. The 56th edition of the *AP Stylebook* included some great changes related to race and ethnicity. We have to remind these folks that the words they still condone using in the criminal system are also rooted in racism.

Legal Ease

For those working in the legal field, using person-first language is critical. When attorneys and judges see us labeled as a "~~defendant~~" or "~~offender~~" on paper, and jurors hear us called those words instead of our names, they forget that we're a person just like them, with a family and a life. Dehumanization techniques make it easier for us to be accused, prosecuted, and incarcerated, or worse. When our legal advocates adopt a defense strategy that includes rejecting those terms, it not only helps our case, it builds trust with us, as clients and as a community.

Where 'client-centered lawyering' is promoted, criminal defense lawyers believe they have a duty to 'humanize' their clients. Now, this type of representation is important and effective. But we reject the idea that another person has to 'humanize' us. We're already human! It's simply the defense lawyer's duty to remind the prosecutor, judge, jurors, prison, and parole board of that fact.

Prosecutors, as 'ministers of justice,' also have a duty to use person-first language. Akhi Johnson's [What's in a Name?](#) explores how prosecutors can not only maintain integrity, but bring humanity back to courtrooms, by justly dignifying the people they prosecute. Casey Orr's [People and Power](#) explains the importance of *everyone* using person-first language in the courts. Though Orr uses the word "justice" where we would not, we find her analysis to be spot on.

Calling yourself or your client by name rather than "Defendant" is easy, but some lawyers struggle to work around bad language in the law. As you craft arguments and emails, be careful not to let your client (or yourself) *become* the bad words:

- ✗ Instead of "Defendant was sentenced as a recidivist," try **"Mr. Smith was sentenced under the recidivism statute."**
- ✗ Instead of "he is a First Offender," try **"Mr. Smith was sentenced under Georgia's 'First Offender Act,'"** using quotes to acknowledge the law but denote that you don't use that word.
- ✗ Instead of "Defendant was charged with possession of a firearm by a convicted felon," try **"Mr. Smith has been accused of possessing a firearm as a person with a felony conviction."**
- ✗ Instead of "I'm writing on behalf of Inmate James Smith, #12345," try **"I'm writing on behalf of Mr. James Smith, GDC #12345."**

Though we're talking about the criminal system, better practices are needed in civil litigation, too. Rather than calling people "other inmates" in your claims, try "other people incarcerated." Judges need to see *all* of us as people first.

Adopt a ‘for us, by us’ approach

The ACSP takes a ‘for us, by us’ approach to everything we do. That means leading in all endeavors and conversations that have to do with our lives, instead of letting others speak *for* or *about* us. We find it especially powerful to lead in policy efforts and research surrounding criminalization and incarceration, and their effects on us, our families and communities.

In the policy field, we recognize the impracticability of changing all of the discriminatory language in our state laws at once. In Georgia, the words “inmate” and “offender” alone appear thousands of times in our statutory codes. To change this, we have to be involved in the bill writing process, working with other policy leaders to remove bad words from new legislation as we go and speaking up to elected public servants who have trouble recognizing us as people.

In academic spaces, we should be the ones leading research about us. This means doing more than assisting (often unpaid), or even being on the research team. It means being listed as the PI. Outside of that, we highlight the work of, and stand in solidarity with, those making conscious efforts to evolve stigmatizing language in their respective fields and involve us in the methodological phases of research. As much as possible, we refrain from citing sources that use bad words. When we need to cite older, cornerstone studies or state reports, we simply redact the bad words or asterisk them out.

Overall, ‘schools of thought’ which are built upon inaccurate theories of public safety, which rely upon cyclical constructions of “crime,” and which interpret human

behavior through any of these clouded lenses are illegitimate. We appreciate scholars who are working to redirect longstanding tenets in these fields, and who use language as a tool for accomplishing that. For example, we reject one-sided approaches to what’s known at “criminology” or “criminal science” - areas of ‘study’ in which the persons being criminalized are analyzed but the persons doing the criminalizing are not. In the “behavioral health” field, we appreciate the shift toward trauma-informed care and centering the experiences of those affected, deflecting the power of harm by referring to “survivors” rather than “victims.” But survivor empowerment often leads to the increased use of terms like “abuser” and “perpetrator” to describe the person who did the harm, and assumes a purely individualistic view of accountability, ignoring any accountability for systemic and structural causes of harm.

experiences. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 37 (3), 3.
10.1016/j.ijlp.2014.02.024
7 [REDACTED] released during CY2022 (2023, January 19). Georgia Department of Corrections Office of Information Technology Data Management Section.
8 Active [REDACTED] with mental health Level 2 and above (2023, January 19). Georgia Department of Corrections Office of Information Technology Data Management Section.
9 How much does opioid treatment cost? (2021, December). National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Be indivisible

The ACSP’s position is to reject any legislation, regulatory proposals, class litigation efforts, or public campaigns which would divide people who have been criminalized into, or discriminate against certain, groups or categories. We reject legislative carveouts, or exceptions. The people usually excepted from the benefits of reformative laws are the individuals already being discriminated against at compounded rates (those convicted of sex-related offenses or “serious felonies”). We reject the use of registries, not only because they create undue hardships but because they fail to accomplish any of the things those who argue for their existence claim they will. We reject ridiculous narratives seeking to separate us into “non-violent” and “violent” categories. On a case-by-case basis, we acknowledge the value in arguing for relief against offenses categorized as non-violent or unintentional. But we also assert that just because an offense is deemed “violent,” that doesn’t make the *person* violent. We understand the truth in what [Ashley Nellis](#) and others have proven - that those of us convicted of homicide and ‘violent’ offenses are the least likely to ever be recriminalized. We reject the wild notion that ‘innocent’ people are more deserving of humane treatment, safety, and life than ‘guilty’ people. And we assert that everyone, culpable or not, deserves constitutional Due Process protections.

Ain't no justice

When we talk about the criminal system, we are expressly talking about a web of unjust state fixtures that strongarm and oppress its citizens. The criminal system is not a place where justice is found, so we don't include the word "justice" when we're talking about it, unless we're specifically talking about working toward or seeking justice.

"Returning citizen" rubs us the wrong way because, although we are required to pay taxes that fund policing, incarceration, and the salaries of politicians who make uninformed decisions about our lives, we are consistently barred from participating in civil processes.

Don't be so rigid

Every university and self-proclaimed 'social justice' organization has put out a language policy or statement at this point. In general, we stay away from the ones written by well-off academics who have no experience with incarceration or poverty. It's not that those policies are horrible; they're just rigid. They come across as directives, rather than an invitation to have a conversation. And the style is just... political correctness. If you notice, many of these policies use the term "formerly incarcerated person." Our community has adopted "FIP" as a take-back term. But "formerly incarcerated person" is not person-first language and, in many ways, reinforces an institutional problem by claiming that *this* is the right way to say it. Letting disconnected do-gooders decide what words should be systematically used for us is no better than letting disconnected legislators do it.

Rather than telling people what to call us, we're just asking to be called **people**.

Cues from Others

Disability rights

The directly-impacted community should take cues from the disability rights community. At least since the late 1980s of the Disability Rights Movement, which continues to this day, advocates have called for an end to harmful language as a way to combat ableism. That is, the way we write and talk about each other goes to how we value each other. If in doubt, check out the [United Nations Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines](#).

Healthcare and substance use

Doctors and nurses are trained to see all patients as *patients*. This concept of care should bring equity to spaces where incarceration and medical or mental health care overlap - and considering the realities of [post incarceration syndrome](#), that's a lot. Nguyen Toan Tran et al.'s [Words Matter](#) offers a short but incredible argument for using person-first language when talking about patients who are incarcerated. It includes considerations for language around mental health, sex work, drug sale, use, and treatment, and other areas where judgmental language has persisted for far too long.

As medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and harm reduction practices have gained traction, so has language regarding substance use. In January 2024, [Nikki Tierney](#) led the charge to make New Jersey the first state to remove stigmatizing language concerning substance use disorders from its laws and state agency names. If in doubt, [Shatterproof](#) offers great suggestions for language that reduces stigma and improves outcomes for those battling addiction. And the National Harm Reduction Coalition, with its [Foundational Principles](#), not only calls for better language, but challenges us to show people who use drugs the dignity and respect they deserve.