



ATLCOMMUNITYSUPPORT.ORG

Language & Style

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.



Atlanta Community Support Project advances legal access and community empowerment by getting people directly affected by poverty and incarceration resources to self-advocate in prison and after release. We do this by maintaining a secure online resource library - our [Toolkits platform](#); organizing around rights trainings; leading community research; making non-partisan policy recommendations; and collaborating with legal partners through our Pro Bono Initiative.

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

SEE, HERE'S THE PROBLEM

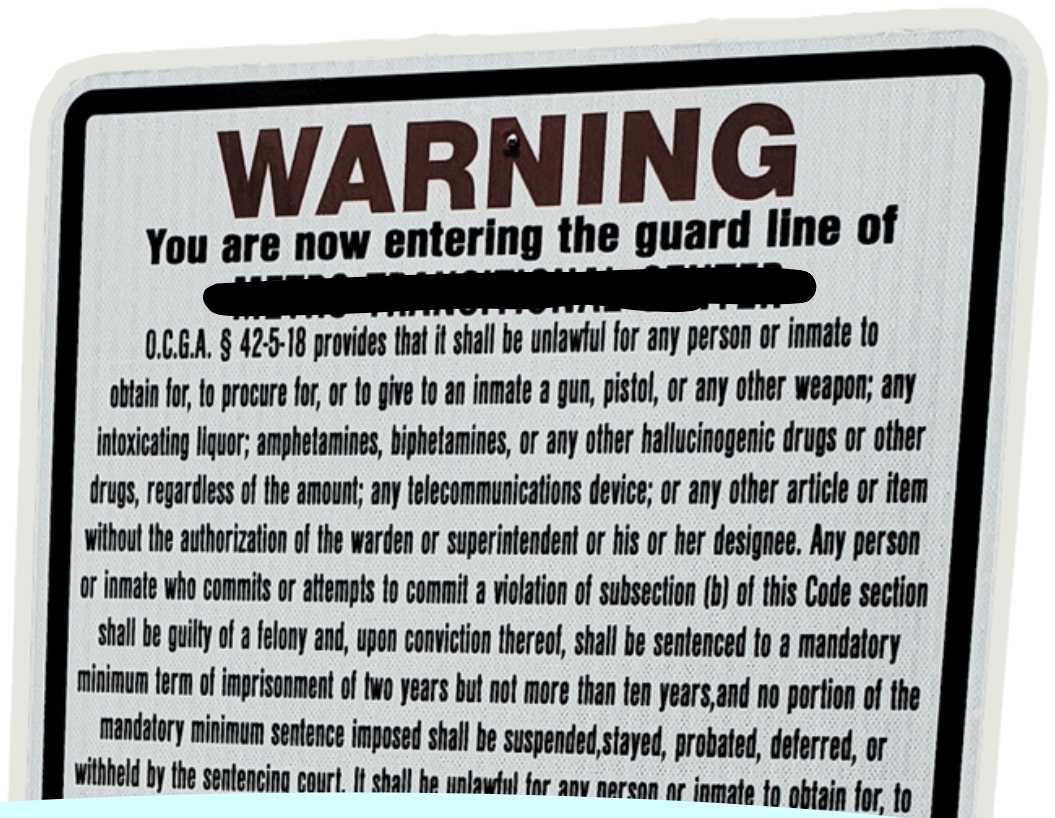
We live in a culture that teaches us to other. The othering happens not just in the ways individuals and groups are discriminated against, through policies and social 'norms,' but in the way we regard each other - the way we talk about each other.

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 communications experts, 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.

REMEMBER THIS

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](#) eloquently emphasized the importance of person-first language when few were talking about it, and his letter is still a perfect place to start.

ACSP understands that even 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 remain willing to have ongoing conversations, because just like learning a new language, unlearning bad habits won't happen overnight.

Control your narrative

Inside, we often feel powerless to argue about language. After release, many of us are so eager to get our stories out that we don't pay attention to *how*. 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. It's unethical and it's defamatory. 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 ACSP 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 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?</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 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 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 - which says it's okay for the state to treat people like we 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 editors and let them know their work is 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 take a stand against *all* language-based oppression and defamation. 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 or self-representing, 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 everybody's case, it builds trust with us, as clients and as a community.

While we do believe 'client-centered lawyering' is important and effective, we also 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. Lean into your clients because we're the experts on these issues.

Prosecutors, as 'ministers of justice,' 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, but her analysis is spot on.

Calling yourself or your client by name rather than "defendant" is easy, but some lawyers struggle with bad language in the law, or refuse to defend their clients' personhood when emailing or talking to system actors. 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.

Other Considerations

An informed approach

ACSP takes a 'for us, by us' approach to all our work. 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 and paternalistic language (often rooted in 'crime' myths) from new legislation as we go and having conversations with lawmakers who have trouble recognizing us as equals, seeing us as constituents, or understanding why dehumanizing language is so harmful.

In academic spaces, we should be the ones leading research about us. This means more than assisting, doing unpaid labor, or even being on the research team. It means us leading projects as the principal investigator (PI). It means highlighting the work and standing in solidarity with those making conscious efforts to eradicate stigmatizing language, embedded patriarchal, and paternalist practices. At ACSP, we try to refrain from citing sources that use bad language altogether. When we need to cite older, cornerstone studies or state reports, we simply redact the bad words or asterisk them out.

Overall, we find 'schools of thought' built upon inaccurate theories of public safety, which rely upon cyclical constructions of "crime," and interpret human behavior through any of these clouded lenses to be illegitimate.

We appreciate scholars who working to redirect longstanding tenets in these fields, and who use language as a tool for accomplishing that. For example, we reject one-sided, traditional approaches to "criminology" or "criminal science" - outdated areas of 'study' in which the persons being criminalized are analyzed but the persons doing the criminalizing are not. We reject constructs of "behavioral health" that exist for the sole purpose of blaming individuals for societal and systemic failures. We appreciate shifts toward peer support and trauma-informed care. We deflect the power of harm by referring to "survivors" rather than "victims." But we also have to be careful because survivor empowerment often leads to the increased use of terms like "abuser" and "perpetrator" to describe the person who did the harm, again assuming a purely individualistic view of accountability and ignoring structural causes of harm.

experiences. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 37 (3), 32.
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

ACSP cannot get behind legislation, regulatory proposals, class litigation efforts, or public campaigns which divide people who have been criminalized into groups or categories. This means rejecting legislative carveouts, or exceptions, because the people usually exempted from the benefits of good new laws are the ones already being discriminated against the most (those convicted of sex-related offenses or "serious felonies"). We reject the use of registries, which create housing crises, community instability, and work against public safety. We reject ridiculous narratives seeking to separate us into "non-violent" and "violent" categories. On a case-by-case basis, there may be value in arguing for relief against offenses categorized as non-violent or unintentional. But just because an offense is labelled "violent" doesn't make the *person* violent. We personally understand the truth in what Ashley Nellis and others have written about the fact 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. We don't entertain 'redemption' narratives hell-bent on the idea that we have to apologize for what's been done to us in order to gain pathways to a better life. ACSP asserts that everyone deserves constitutional protections, equal treatment, and fair, first chances to begin with.

Ain't no justice

When ACSP talks 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 that’s why we don’t include the word unless we’re specifically talking about working toward or seeking justice. “Returning citizen” also rubs us the wrong way because, although we are required to pay taxes that fund the infrastructure that disrupts and destroys our lives, we are consistently barred from participating in civil processes.

Oh, brother

Look, we know a lot of our brothers and sisters have no issue using dehumanizing words. They say the words themselves don’t matter. So, let us just say this: we’re not here to police your language. We’re here to promote political education, to collectively learn about the root causes of systems of harm, and to make sure all y’all know your rights and how to effectively advocate for yourselves. But when we’re out here **advocating for you**, training lawyers and others on how to be respectful and effective, and then you talk about yourself in the complete opposite manner, it frustrates our mission.

Don't be so rigid

We realize 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 discuss. Often, they were written by folks we’ve had the language debate with repeatedly in the past. They become... political correctness. That’s not what this is about.

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 from its laws and state agency names. If in doubt, Shatterproof has some suggestions for language that reduces stigma and improves outcomes for those battling addiction. And the National Harm Reduction Coalition’s Foundational Principles not only call for better language but challenge us to show people who use drugs the dignity and respect they deserve.