



Language Guide

**Inclusive Terms & Compassionate Descriptions for Our
Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Community Members**

This language guide is meant to be used as a resource for conversations about people in prison, the construction of prisons, and the circumstances of imprisonment.

Language shapes the ways we think about people and the world. A lot of the language we have adopted as a society serves the colonial, capitalist, and carceral agendas of the systems we are dismantling. This guide intends to: uplift the humanity of folks that are typically dehumanized (by centering people first language); call things what they are (ex. jails are jails not correctional facilities); and decolonize language around incarceration.

Repositioning the way we speak and write not only changes our own perspectives but shapes those who are on the receiving end of the message. Shifting our language informs the ways we can imagine the new world we are building. Our movements, analyses, and frameworks are iterative, ever-growing, and intersectional. So is our language. CURB doesn't support any form of policing, including that of language. We seek to consistently update our terminology based on whatever consensus is achievable by those most impacted by systemic oppression. We take leadership on language from directly impacted communities. We are open to your feedback and suggestions.

ADVISORY: This guide will discuss words that some might find hurtful or triggering. Please email info@curbprisonspending.org with questions, concerns or feedback.





People First Language...

- **Puts a person before a trait**, describing what a person “has” or the circumstances they’re in, rather than asserting what a person “is.”
- **Strives to avoid marginalization or dehumanization** (either purposefully or accidentally) and tries to center personhood when discussing people.
- **Avoids using labels or adjectives to define someone**, utilizing terms such as “incarcerated people” or “a person with problematic substance use,” instead of “an inmate” or “a drug addict.”
- **Supports efforts to change the narrative** about incarcerated and currently incarcerated people into one that centers their humanity, not their conviction. Instead of addressing symptoms, names problems at their root.

Example: Tom is an advocate for people who are incarcerated.





Identity First Language

- Some individuals use a word a phrase that they feel describes them to **self-identify**.
- Sometimes it is respectful to use person first language, sometimes it is respectful to use identity first language. **CURB uses People First Language (PFL) unless it's clear we should do otherwise.** However, we've been taught that neither are *inherently* disrespectful.
- **PFL can be problematic for some disabled folks.** Many people with disabilities prefer identity first language because they regard disability is inextricably linked to who they are.
- Proponents of using PFL should be cautious of asserting that PFL is the *only* respectful form of language. **Following the lead of people who have disabilities** in your community is the best practice.

Example: I am African American. I am disabled. I am pansexual.

*For some, identity first language centers **who people feel they are**. People First Language **dispels intentionally or unintentionally harmful language** used to describe a person. It is important to understand why and which one folks use in different situations.*



What to do if I write or say something hurtful

- **Pause for a Moment:** Think about the information that has been shared and how the error was brought to your attention.
- **Give Thanks:** Thank the person who has offered the correction and ask them how you may positively address the harm.
- **Seek Understanding vs Being Understood:** Understanding is an active process that requires decentering yourself and understanding harm done, while being understood does not necessitate any change.
- **Apologize:** Gain an understanding of what happened and the impact of your actions. Then vocalize this understanding as an apology.
- **Change Behavior:** Reflect on how you are going to change behavior as to not replicate harm.

These stages of accountability are a key component of **restorative justice** and ending cycles of violence and harm. **Building an accountable world without prisons and police begins with ourselves.**



PEOPLE IN PRISON



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Unspecified Person in Prison</p>	<p>Phrases: inmate, offender, criminal, felon, prisoner, violator</p> <p>Clarification: Identifying someone as a 'prisoner' should not be used to belittle, shame, ostracize, or dehumanize someone.</p> <p>Example: "Prisoner, sit down."</p>	<p>Phrases: imprisoned person, person in prison, incarcerated person</p> <p>Clarification: Identifying someone as a 'prisoner' can be used to acknowledge that they are being imprisoned by the state against their will.</p> <p>Example: "Tom is being held prisoner."</p>	<p>We want to highlight the fact that imprisonment is an active thing that happens to people; challenge the narrative that those in prison brought imprisonment upon themselves; shift the focus away from blaming individuals rather than the prison system, societal conditions, the police, etc.</p>
<p>Formerly Imprisoned Person</p>	<p>Phrases: ex-convict, ex-con, ex-offender, parolee</p> <p>Example: LA Times headline "LA County supervisors consider helping ex-offenders get ID cards"</p>	<p>Phrases: formerly incarcerated person, formerly imprisoned person</p>	<p>As above, leading with People First Language.</p>
<p>Formerly Convicted Person</p>	<p>Phrases: felon, ex-convict, ex-con, ex-offender</p>	<p>Phrases: person with a conviction, person convicted of criminalized behavior</p>	<p>As above, adding that some people are convicted of a felony or misdemeanor but do not get sentenced to serve time in a cage.</p>
<p>People in Women's Prisons</p>	<p>Phrases: Women inmates</p>	<p>Phrases: People in women's prisons</p>	<p>To be inclusive of gender non-conforming and trans people in prisons.</p>

People in Prison (continued)



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Disabled People in Prison</p>	<p>Phrases: crippled, handicapped, or by other acronym of their disability</p>	<p>Phrases: Imprisoned disabled people, disabled people in prison, Deaf, Blind, DeafBlind (Capitalize the and D and B; they are nouns) Note: Some Deaf and Blind people do not identify as disabled.</p> <p>Framing: Some people with disabilities think that defining themselves by their disability reduces them to their disability and further dehumanizes them. Others embrace their disability as an identity category.</p>	<p>Many people with disabilities choose to self-define in many different ways including identity first language or People First Language. We honor and respect the diverse opinions about language in this community. When writing or speaking on the subject, highlighting this diversity of opinions is important. CURB's default is always to uplift People First Language.</p>
<p>People in Prison with Mental Health Needs</p>	<p>Phrases: Special needs, mad, crazy, or by other acronym of their disability</p> <p>Clarification: many people with mental health needs identify as 'mad' or 'crazy', however neurotypical folks should never assume this or use it to identify someone</p>	<p>Phrases: People with mental illnesses in prison, neurodivergent people in prison, people in prison diagnosed with schizophrenia.</p> <p>Clarification: Some disability advocates use "mentally ill people". If someone is being held against their will in a psychiatric facility, this is called psychiatric incarceration.</p> <p>Note: Avoid gatekeeping by only acknowledging documented disabilities. Self-diagnosis is valid.</p>	<p>Consider "mirroring" the language a person uses. If someone says "I'm mentally ill," it's ok to say "as a mentally ill person." Only do so after someone has introduced themselves as such. Avoid defining people by physical, psychological, or other differences. CURB's default is always to uplift People First Language.</p>

People in Prison (continued)



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Gang Validation, “Security Threat Groups” (Regarding Solitary Confinement)</p>	<p>Phrases: Gang member, gang leader, security threat group (associate and member), “worst of the worst,” shot caller</p> <p>Framing: Anything that suggests a risk to the broader prison population</p>	<p>Phrases: People targeted as gang members</p> <p>Framing: Imprisoned organizers, activists (in context of hunger strike, for example)</p>	<p>The prison system’s anti-gang propaganda is often based on offensive, dangerous, and racist stereotypes that dehumanize people of color and poor people. A gang is a club like any other member organization. Being a member of a gang is not inherently bad, gangs are communities. We must challenge all attempts to depoliticize and delegitimize political resistance on the inside.</p>
<p>People in Prison with Diverse Gender Identities or Presentations</p>	<p>Phrases: “male inmates who presented themselves as women”</p> <p>Framing: anything that disrespects or denies an imprisoned person’s chosen or preferred gender identity.</p>	<p>Phrases: transgender, gender nonconforming, intersex (TGI)</p>	<p>To be inclusive of TGI people in prisons. Misgendering someone is not only dehumanizing but perpetuates gender based violence.</p>
<p>People without Citizenship Rights in the U.S.</p>	<p>Phrases: illegal immigrants, illegal aliens</p> <p>Framing: anything that dehumanizes and “others” someone because of their citizenship status</p>	<p>Phrases: people without documentation, undocumented folks, people who have immigrated</p>	<p>These terms scapegoat individuals for problems that are systemic, dehumanizes communities, and is used to discriminate. CURB also supports language that seeks to erase borders.</p>

PRISONS & CONSTRUCTION



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Diversion of Public Funds for Incarceration</p>	<p>Phrases: Investments (with reference to increased carceral spending)</p> <p>Framing: “The county plans to invest \$2 billion in a new jail.” “Investments in prison building projects improve public safety.”</p>	<p>Phrases: Waste, divert, squander</p> <p>Framing: County Supervisors decided to waste another \$2 billion on an unneeded jail. OR The Sheriff wants the County to divert more funds from human services to pay for his \$2 billion jail project.</p>	<p>Prisons & jails are not investments. Schools are an investment. Public health clinics are an investment. Investments promise a positive payout. More jails, prisons, and police are part of the problem, not an investment towards a solution.</p>
<p>Prisons and Jails</p>	<p>Phrases: Any euphemism for a cage. Community Correctional Facility, Female Rehabilitative Community Corrections Center (FRCCC), beds, rehab, corrections</p>	<p>Phrases: prison, jail, cage</p> <p>Example: In the campaign against AB76, we were successful in getting most media in the state to call the FRCCC’s 'women's mini-prisons.'</p>	<p>As prisons and jails try to rebrand themselves as social services, we need to remind the public that cages are cages, and that cops and prison guards are not social workers or therapists. Reliance on punitive systems does not increase public safety.</p>

CIRCUMSTANCES OF IMPRISONMENT



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Sentencing and Indictment</p>	<p>Phrases: committed _____ crime</p> <p>Framing: Rather than describing people by category of charge (murderer, rapist, drug dealer), note the circumstance of imprisonment</p>	<p>Phrases: sentenced to, imprisoned for</p> <p>Example: Tony is imprisoned for charges of drug dealing.</p>	<p>To focus on the active nature of indictment and sentencing, that this is a thing that happens to and is imposed on people via state violence. To avoid reducing someone to their charge.</p>
<p>Imprisonment Related to Substance Abuse</p>	<p>Phrases: drug user, drug addict, junkie, crackhead</p> <p>Example: Milford News headline: “ACLU sues over sending drug addicts to Framingham prison”</p>	<p>Phrases: People using drugs, people who have used drugs, people in recovery, people suffering from addiction, people with problematic substance use, people who identify as drug addicts</p>	<p>To avoid defining people by physical, psychological, or other differences. To recognize addiction as a disease, often influenced by the state.</p>
<p>Violence and Harm</p>	<p>Phrases - For the person who was harmed: battered woman, victim</p> <p>For the person who did harm: perpetrator, batterer, rapist</p> <p>Example: Article titled “Victim Takes the Stand in Greg Hardy Domestic Violence Trial”</p>	<p>Phrases - For the person who was harmed: survivor (unless no longer living), person who has been harmed</p> <p>For the person who did harm: person who caused harm, person responsible for the harm</p>	<p>We want survivors to be empowered.</p> <p>We want people who did harm to not be frozen in their worst moment.</p>

Circumstances of Imprisonment (continued)



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
Criminalized Behavior	Phrases: Crime(s), offense(s)	Phrases: criminalized behavior, conviction(s) (or charge(s) if someone is not yet formally found guilty in court). Framing: Crimes are socially constructed. Behaviors that are considered criminal today may be considered honorable in another society, day, and age. Crime is the legal status of a behavior and isn't the behavior itself but the social response to that behavior or the person who performs the behavior (Rosenfeld).	In order to understand that crime is a social construct we should plainly state that behaviors are criminalized. This helps keep us very clear when we talk about decriminalizing certain elements written into the penal code. If something is constructed, it can be deconstructed. In addition, Everyone that is warehoused in a cage is not necessarily guilty of any offense. Some people are innocent. Some people have been named guilty of certain criminalized behavior that doesn't accurately describe their actions. Conviction/criminalized behavior captures all who are warehoused in cages, no matter innocent, guilty or incorrectly charged.

Circumstances of Imprisonment (continued)



FRAMING	Language CURB Tries to Avoid	CURB's Language	Why
<p>Lengthy Prison Sentences</p>	<p>Phrases: extreme sentencing</p>	<p>Phrases: draconian sentencing, lengthy sentencing</p> <p>Example: Article titled “The United States Rethinks Draconian Drug Sentencing Policies”</p>	<p>It is difficult to define what extreme is. Is it 5 years? 10? 25 or more? Draconian by definition captures all sentencing, seeing as all sentencing to serve time in a cage is harsh and severe. We can use that term to talk about a one year term enhancement or 3 strikes.</p>
<p>Mass Incarceration Crisis</p>	<p>Phrases: mass incaceration</p>	<p>Phrases: incarceration crisis, human caging, reliance on cages, mass incarceration crisis</p> <p>Example: Article titled “Unveiling a State by State Plan to End our Mass Incarceration Crisis”</p>	<p>The term “mass incarceration” could infer that there is some level of incarceration that is acceptable. Regardless of what mainstream society thinks, we should use terms that call out the issue for what it is, at its root, and not sugar coat it. We are not shy about abolition. No amount of human caging should be acceptable.</p>
<p>People Convicted of Serious Offenses</p>	<p>Phrases: worst of worst, super predators</p>	<p>Phrases: people responsible for serious harm, people convicted of serious offenses</p>	<p>Labeling folks by the things they have done is not only dehumanizing but stifles their potential in their transformation and healing process.</p>

Contributions and Sources

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The CURB Team and Valued Coalition Members

Please email info@curbprisonspending.org to discuss changes or additions.

