



Underground Scholars Initiative

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Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System

Increasing attention is being given to the language people use when discussing individual or group identities and experiences. In large part, marginalized people must demand the respect to create and amplify language that they consider more humanizing than the negative narratives imposed on us by dominant society. The late Eddie Ellis, a wrongfully convicted member of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, established the first academic think tank run by formerly incarcerated people: Center for NuLeadership in NY. Paroling in 1994 with multiple degrees, Ellis worked to advance the dialogue around those who have been system impacted. Twenty five years later and our collective struggle to be recognized for the fullness of who we are as people remains.

Language is not merely descriptive, it is creative. For too long we have borne the burden of having to recreate our humanity in the eyes of those who would have us permanently defined by a system that grew directly out of the the institution of American slavery, an institution that depended on the dehumanization of the people it enslaved. It is in this spirit that we, the formerly incarcerated and system-impacted academics who identify as the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) at the University of California, Berkeley, call on the media, students, and public to utilize the following terminology when discussing our population individually or collectively. This is not about euphemisms or glossing over people's actions, rather it is about reclaiming our identity as people first. It is important to note that this style guide is equally applicable when talking about similarly situated populations outside of the United States.

Thank you in advance for respecting us enough to treat us as humans.

In solidarity,

Underground Scholars Initiative (USI)

Terminology Guide

Incarcerated Person refers to anyone currently incarcerated. It 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.)

Formerly Incarcerated Person refers to anyone who has been in a carceral setting and is now released. Prison, immigration detention centers, local jails, juvenile detention centers, etc. are included under this umbrella term. Attaching the prefix ex- to anything (ex-convict, ex-felon, etc.) is a clear indication that it, and the root word itself, are unacceptable.

System Impacted includes those who have been incarcerated, those with arrests/convictions but no incarceration and those who have been directly impacted by a loved one being incarcerated. While those close to us, as well as the broader society are negatively impacted by our incarceration, it is often our partners, parents, children and/or siblings who face the most significant disadvantages behind our absence and thus, categorically merit this designation.

Carceral System is far more accurate than the ubiquitous term “Criminal Justice System.” Not all who violate the law (commit a crime) are exposed to this system and justice is a relative term that most people in this country do not positively associate with our current model. In this context, Carceral System is best understood as 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. This includes formal institutions such as, law enforcement and the courts, surveillance and data mining technology, NGO / non-profit consultants, conservative criminologists, those who manifest and/or financially benefit from modern slave labor, corporate predation on incarcerated people and our communities, the counterinsurgency in communities of color through ‘soft-policing’, etc.

People Convicted of (Drug Violations / Violent Offenses / etc.) Calling people “violent offenders”, “drug offenders” etc. continues to reduce one’s identity to a particular type of conviction. It is rarely necessary to specify the type of crime an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated person was convicted of, however, and when doing so, it should be phrased in line with this guidance.

Gang Member is the one term on this list for which there is not a replacement. It is a subjective term that has zero probative value in discourse around communities that experience high rates of violence and/or marginalized people. If people choose to self-identify as such then that is their right. The label should never be placed on another.

Person on Parole / Probation instead of “parolee” or “probationer.” Again, it is about articulating the person first, not whatever temporary or circumstantial qualifiers may be perceived. Be mindful to preserve the privacy of those who may be on probation or parole.

People with No Lawful Status are those with no legal status and who are not engaged with the immigration system at this time for whatever reason.

Undocumented People refers to people who are engaged in the asylum, DACA, etc. process but it is not complete to the point of providing guaranteed citizenship.

Resident should replace “citizen”, including in the phrase “returning citizen” that has been adopted by some to describe formerly incarcerated people. Citizens carry rights and responsibilities that many incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, undocumented people, and people without status do not have. Millions of people are legally denied the right to vote, the right to serve on a jury, the right to run for an elected office, the right to travel freely, etc. Citizenship is exclusive and the word should only be used when intended to refer to people who carry all the rights of citizenship.

Sexual Assault Survivor refers to anyone who has experienced molestation, rape, sexual assault, etc. While far too many people have experienced abuse; that does not make the sexual assault survivor a victim.

Sex Trafficking Survivors are also sexual assault survivors, yet with the added trauma of being kidnapped and exploited for the economic gain of others. The survivors are often incarcerated for the very acts they were forced to do, exacerbating a cycle of abuse. Not all Sex Workers, most often female and LGBTQ people, have been, or are being trafficked. Caution must be taken to not conflate the two.

Sex Workers are people voluntarily engaged in any work, whether legal or illegal, that centers around sex. This includes street prostitution, webcam workers, escorts, etc. of any gender identity. It does not include exotic dancers who choose not to engage in off-stage business as described, nor is it the proper designation for sex trafficking survivors.

Communities that Experience High Rates of Violence is preferable to “violent communities” and its evil twin “bad/disadvantaged neighborhoods.” Labeling a community as “violent” demonizes all people within it. It places the burden of such a disparaging label on the community itself without highlighting the systemic factors that are necessary for a community to repeatedly experience such trauma.

Drug / Substance Use is more accurate than “abuse”. One does not abuse heroin, meth, alcohol etc., they use it to feel the anticipated effects of the substance. The classification and prohibition of substances is political, not medical, and has always been a tool to police communities of color. To misidentify users as abusers is a continuation of the strategic propaganda employed to dehumanize and vilify particular populations who use drugs. Drug and substance use among marginalized people is often a means of self-medicating for us who are denied meaningful access to local, culturally competent, and affordable mental health services by the same systems that perpetuate the abuse from which we seek relief. People who are abused cannot then be called abusers for a private, personal attempt at self-preservation.

Topical Guide

Public Safety All of us are in favor of public safety even as many are rightfully critical of law enforcement. The two concepts are not synonymous, and in fact are typically in conflict, as evident when one views videos of police killing residents, destroying property and harassing people traveling by foot, car, bus or plane. We encourage those writing about police/community relations to challenge both sides on what public safety looks like, particularly in communities where many residents find the police to be a destabilizing force operating contrary to safety.

War on Crime / Drugs / Gangs are failed policies of the US government executed here and abroad and should be exposed as such in any discourse that chooses to use this verbiage lest the public continue to believe these are efforts that deserve support.

Violent vs. Non-Violent Crimes is a pseudo-dichotomy. Burglary can be a “violent crime” while rape may be “non-violent”. Furthermore, the vast majority of people incarcerated in non-immigration detention centers are classified as violent thus, any substantive reform must include them / us. Lastly, we know the threat of incarceration is not a meaningful deterrent, and with programs like higher education for the incarcerated, people can leave prison and be successful regardless of their commitment offense.

Good vs. Bad in any context of human beings is flawed at best and violent at worst. Juxtaposing “good immigrants” who do things the right way with “bad immigrants” who don’t, or “good people” who change their life with “bad people” who don’t, or “good girls” who appear to accept patriarchy with “bad girls” who clearly don’t, are all value judgments dependent on the perspective of the person framing the narrative. These narratives are overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, middle-or upper-class, male, Protestant perspectives. Those of us who do not fit in that mold have and will find ourselves misrepresented, devalued, and differentiated.

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