

Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide: Five Tips for Language That Changes Hearts & Minds

Momentum is growing for policymakers to improve the criminal justice system and adopt strategies that keep all communities safe; prevent harm; and uphold the values of fairness, equal justice, respect, and accountability. Yet research, experience, and input from participants in the criminal legal system reveal that the current vocabulary around criminal justice often perpetuates misconceptions, reinforces stereotypes, and hampers improvement of the system. What follow are suggested ways to revisit the language used, along with tips and specific suggestions to promote a more equitable and more accurate discourse that is respectful and effective at advancing criminal justice reform.

The goal of this document is to provide suggestions for effective and appropriate language to move the needle toward reform. We welcome your reactions, ideas, and insights.

#1: People, Not Labels

The traditional language of the criminal justice system is often dehumanizing and fosters stigma, stereotypes, and fear. Instead of labels, talk about the *people* touched by the system; they are members of our community and nation.

<u>INSTEAD OF...</u>	<u>TRY...</u>
Felons	People convicted of felonies
Criminals, Convicts	People convicted of crimes
Inmates	People in prison or jail
Prisoners	People who are currently incarcerated
Offenders	People who have committed offenses
Defendants	People accused of a crime
Illegal Immigrants, Illegal Aliens	People without documentation
Worst of the Worst	People who have committed serious offenses
Violent Offenders	People who have committed serious offenses
Nonviolent Offenders	People who have committed less serious offenses
Ex-Cons	People who have paid their debt to society
Parolees	People on parole
“Bad guys” or “crooks”	People charged with or accused of a crime
Sex Offenders	People convicted of a sex crime



#2: Obstacles Before Outcomes

Instead of jumping straight to unequal outcomes, take the time to explain the unfair systems and inequitable treatment that lead to those outcomes. Otherwise, many audiences will inaccurately assume that unequal outcomes happen because some groups are simply more prone to crime.

<u>INSTEAD OF...</u>	<u>TRY...</u>
Racial Disparities, Gaps	Obstacles to Equal Justice, Discriminatory School Discipline, Racial Profiling, Unconscious Bias
	<i>...resulting in</i> unequal rates of arrest, incarceration, long sentences...

#3: Break Stereotypes

Antiquated language about communities and crime tends to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and drive flawed and misdirected policy. Use language that respects communities and acknowledges the disinvestment in neighborhoods and groups that contributes to higher levels of crime and violence.

<u>INSTEAD OF...</u>	<u>TRY...</u>
Dangerous neighborhoods	Communities experiencing high levels of violence
Poor, At risk	Underserved, Neglected
Minorities	People of color (or specific groups)
Homosexual, Gay lifestyle	Gay, Lesbian, LGBTQ people and their lives
Federal, State, and Local Governments	Federal, State, Tribal, and Local Governments
Rape victim	Sexual assault survivor
Prostitute	Sex worker

#4: Avoid Unnecessary and Harmful Distinctions

Opinion research shows that most Americans support reforming the justice system and do not automatically distinguish between violent and nonviolent crimes or drug and other offenses. Avoid making those distinctions unnecessarily; these lines of demarcation can reduce support for broad-based reform of the system.

<u>INSTEAD OF...</u>	<u>TRY...</u>
Nonviolent drug offenses	Appropriate offenses, less serious offenses
Balancing safety and reform	Advancing safety and fairness
Citizens, Taxpayers	The community, The public, People

#5: Foster New Thinking and Innovative Approaches

Repeating old tropes and phrases tends to reinforce outdated thinking about the justice system. Consider fresh ways of talking about the system that promote the values the system should represent.

<u>INSTEAD OF...</u>	<u>TRY...</u>
Punish Crime	Prevent Harm, Promote Community Safety
Law and Order	Accountability, Rehabilitation, Restoration, Equal Justice, Due Process
War on Crime/Drugs	Prevention, Community Safety, Treatment, Solutions and Alternatives, Doing what works
Tough on Crime	Smart and appropriate responses

For additional resources on communications for criminal justice reform:

- *Building a Narrative to Address Violence in the U.S.*, The Opportunity Agenda and Common Justice (2018), <https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/building-narrative-address-violence-us>
- *Remembering Eddie Ellis and the Power of Language*, Vera Institute of Justice, Danielle Sered, <https://www.vera.org/blog/remembering-eddie-ellis-and-the-power-of-language>



- *The Social Justice Phrase Guide*, Advancement Project and The Opportunity Agenda, <https://advancementproject.org/resources/the-social-justice-phrase-guide/>
- *Talking About Immigrants and the Criminal Justice System*, The Opportunity Agenda (2015), <https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/talking-about-immigrants-and-criminal-justice-system>
- *Ten Lessons for Talking about Criminal Justice Issues*, The Opportunity Agenda, <https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/ten-lessons-talking-about-criminal-justice-issues>
- *We Are People: Resources for Humanizing Language*, The Osborne Association, <http://www.osborneny.org/news/we-are-people-resources-for-humanizing-language/>
- *Words Matter*, The Fortune Society Reentry Education Project, https://gallery.mailchimp.com/ae6555fac44e3d725bead12cb/files/Words_matter.pdf