

The Marshall Project Akiba Solomon <info@themarshallproject.org>

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Our style and standards for reporting on criminal justice

To revnfarley@comcast.net

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Dear Reader,

The Marshall Project's leadership on criminal justice reporting means that fellow journalists often ask us about our style and standards around the language of criminal justice — and activists challenge us on our occasional usage of words such as “inmate.”

In 2015, we published the beginnings of a style guidance on these words. We participated in a 2019 forum on language in San Quentin State Prison, led by incarcerated journalist Rahsaan Thomas. But we didn't make any concrete decisions about which words we would and would not use.

Now we have. We've invested deeply in incarcerated and formerly incarcerated audiences, and our growing engagement with these readers has shown us that descriptors like “inmate,” “felon” and “offender” are not the clear and neutral terms reporters and editors have long assumed them to be. The stigma and material consequences of incarceration are so deep that what may seem like a basic descriptor to journalists can be a permanent, potentially life-altering label.



At its heart, journalism is a discipline of clarity. [The Language Project](#) is our attempt to set the record straight.

Our guide, [“What Words We Use — and Avoid — When Covering People and Incarceration,”](#) makes public our decision to avoid labels such as “inmate,” in favor of language that follows the logic of “person-first” language. And our accompanying series of pieces by and about people with intimate experience of incarceration shows the human impact of the words we choose.

- [“I Am Not Your Inmate”](#) by Lawrence Bartley: “I didn’t always detest this term. But hearing officers use it as an insult reminded me to call incarcerated people — including myself — by our names.”
- [“Good Intentions Don’t Blunt the Impact of Dehumanizing Words”](#) by Lisette Bamenga: “Of course not everyone means harm when they use prison labels. But that doesn’t make the language any less damaging.”
- [“I Was Trained to Call Men a Word They Hated”](#) by Kevin Byrd: “As correctional officers, we are conditioned to call prisoners ‘inmates.’ But at Sing Sing, where I worked for 25 years, that was as bad as calling them a snitch.”

- “[How I Convinced My Incarcerated Peers to Make Language a Priority](#)” by Rahsaan Thomas: The writer, an imprisoned journalist, has long fought to change the way outside media describe people in prison. One of his toughest crowds? His fellow reporters.
- “[People-First Language Matters. So Does the Rest of the Story.](#)” a Q&A with Alexandra Cox by Wilbert L. Cooper: “While we have to be aware that any word we choose has influence, no amount of Googling will reveal the magic word that brings justice into American prisons.”

Looking ahead, we will apply this style guidance to all of our work — and invite other publications to reevaluate the language they use around incarceration.

With thanks,

Akiba Solomon

Senior Editor, The Marshall Project

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