Person-First Language for Advocates & Allies

PRACTICE GUIDE

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Why Language Matters

The words we choose shape public understanding, inform policy, and impact how people experience justice—or injustice. Studies show that language affects how the general public perceives policy proposals, their own safety in community and the people impacted by the justice system.

In criminal legal reform, it's vital to use language that honors people's full humanity rather than reducing them to labels rooted in punishment or stigma. This is especially true when referring to people impacted by conviction registries and survivors of sexual harm.

Core Principles of Person-First Language

- **Center the Person, not the Conviction or the Harm** – Use terms that recognize individuals as people first.
- **Avoid Dehumanizing or Permanent Labels** – Language like 'sex offender' erases the possibility of change. Only referring to someone as a "victim" flattens them to their experience of harm. People are more that what they have done or what has happened to them.
- **Reject Crime or Harm Comparisons** – Avoid framing harms as better or worse than others, or individuals as less deserving of care or redemption.
- **Name Systems Accurately** – Use terms that reveal the punitive, punishing nature of structures like registries.(surveillance, post-conviction sanctions, banishment laws, shaming list)

DEHUMANIZING LABELS OF THE SYSTEM

REMEMBER: *The words we choose shape public understanding, inform policy, and impact how people experience justice—or injustice*

AVOID	USE INSTEAD
Sex Offender	Person required to register/Person on the registry/Person subject to registration/Registry-impacted person/Person experiencing the registry/Person in reentry
Offender	Person living with a record/Person with a conviction/System-Impacted Person/Person in Reentry
Felon	Person with a conviction, system-impacted person/person returning to community
Inmate	Person in jail/prison, resident of prison or jail, person who is incarcerated, person behind the walls
Predator	**Avoid this term;** use accurate, non-stigmatizing language to describe the situation or clinical diagnosis ONLY when necessary (which is rare). Stay away from conflating diagnosis with legal terms and assertions. This term is often used as inappropriate classification in tiered registry systems to stoke fear, or to inappropriately classify crime, ie "super-predators"

Survivors of Harm

It is equally important to use person-first, trauma-informed language when referring to people who have experienced harm. Best practice is to describe experiences without using blanket labels for people or the group as a whole. People who have survived crime and sexual violence should not be defined solely by their victimization. Everyone has the right to be seen as a whole person, with agency, resilience, and a unique path to healing.

People who have suffered harm and abuse relate to their experiences in different ways. Adults, children and young people who have had the time and/or support to process what has happened to them may have strong feelings about the terms they do and don't identify with.

The system uses the term 'victim' for legal purposes. For some, the term is important in this context to describe and validate their experience, yet may not be a label they want to hold forever. Some people may need the term to cope with or grieve through what has happened to them, which may have been suppressed or denied recognition.

When speaking to or about those who have experienced harm, it's important to be led by the language people choose to use themselves, which may vary person to person and depend on the context.

Rather than using the blanket term 'victim' consider using the alternatives listed in the chart on the next page.

Most important is for all people impacted by the cycle of sexual harm to avoid framing justice as a binary struggle between 'us and them.' Such narratives erase complexity and prevent genuine healing and resolution. Instead, focus on harm reduction, meaningful accountability, and the restoration and humanization of everyone involved in the cycle of sexual harm.

LABELS APPLIED TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED HARM

REMEMBER: *The words we choose shape public understanding, inform policy, and impact how people experience justice—or injustice. Those who have experienced harm are not a monolith and should not be flattened to their trauma experience.*

AVOID	USE INSTEAD
VICTIM	Survivor/Thriver (Often utilized by people who have experienced harm to describe themselves, as a way to take their agency and power back)/Person who experienced harm/Person who experience abuse/Person impacted by violence ***The exception*** *is if a person directly shares that they identify with the word victim and prefer to be described in this way*
ACCUSER	Person who initiated proceedings/Injured party/Person who brought legal case/Person *Note: This language substitution does not erase the harm or reality of rare instances of inaccurate or false allegations. It acknowledges the complexity of harm and the perception of harm, human experience, and the cultural history of those who have experienced harm being disbelieved or even blamed for disclosure of their experience.*
'MY VICTIM' *This often shows up inadvertently in personal narratives and should be avoided due to its possessive nature and centering of the person who caused the harm.*	Person I harmed, Person I hurt, Person harmed by my actions, Person I victimized

Tips for Advocates in Speech, Writing and Media

- **Pause and Rephrase** – Correct yourself if you use outdated terms. Give yourself and others the grace needed when mistakes are made. This is a practice and we are all human!
- **Include a Language Note** – Explain your use of person-first language.
- **Correct with Compassion** – Gently explain your word choices.
- **Practice When Telling Stories** – Listen. Share. Ask people how they want to be identified.

Considering True Justice and Community Safety

True justice and community safety holds space for humanity across the spectrum of experience. It prioritizes what obligations are created when harm occurs, accountability, repair and healing—not revenge or permanent punishment. Existing policy approaches need to be modernized and grounded in evidence. People deserve to be treated with fairness when interacting with systems.

This means creating systems that center the voices and needs of those who have survived harm without dehumanizing those who have caused harm. **Learning, practicing, modeling and requesting others use person-first language** is a critical part of working towards a world without sexual harm or the systemic injustice of conviction registries and the counterproductive registry regime.

Contextual Examples: People Living on the Registry

This section of the guide provides context-sensitive, person-first language to refer to individuals required to comply with conviction registry laws. It excludes stigmatizing or system-centered terms like 'sex offender,' 'registrant,' or 'person forced to register,' replaces them with person-first terms and is intended for use in storytelling, legal advocacy, legislative testimony, media, and community education and dialogue.

Storytelling and Personal Narratives

- "As a person navigating the registry, I know firsthand how these laws affect families and communities."
- "I'm a father, neighbor, and person required to register—someone working every day to rebuild and contribute."
- "Since returning home, I've been living under the constraints of a conviction registry, trying to move forward. It is my sincere hope to be part of solutions that end cycles of harm and uphold human dignity for everyone."

Legislative Testimony

- "We urge lawmakers to consider the impact of conviction registries on people in reentry who are subject to lifelong civil penalties. These policies not only disregard basic human rights and civil liberties, they also perpetuate cycles of harm and siphon resources from effective ways to help those who have survived harm."
- "Individuals subject to registration requirements are often denied stable housing, employment, and access to basic rights."
- "The registry system affects millions of people—people who have already been adjudicated, served their sentences and are now navigating reintegration under impossible circumstances."

Contextual Examples: People Living on the Registry

Media Interviews & Public Statements

- "Every person in our communities deserves the chance to thrive. Many community members living under registry restrictions are parents, veterans, and workers who have taken meaningful accountability and simply want to move forward with the positive changes they have made."

- "People labeled by these registry systems are more than their pasts—they are part of our neighborhoods and deserve support, not banishment."

- "We're advocating for the rights of individuals who are experiencing the onerous conditions and destabilization of the registry after serving their sentences. This flies in the face of basic fairness."

Legal Advocacy and Amicus Briefs

- "Registry-impacted individuals face long-term disenfranchisement that extend well beyond their original sentences."

- "The civil regulatory framework of registry statutes disproportionately harms people, without evidence of improved public safety."

- "Persons on the registry endure ongoing punishment under the guise of public safety, often without an individualized risk assessment."

Community Education & Dialogue

- "A person in your community who is on the registry might be your coworker, friend, or family member."

- "Let's remember: a person on the registry is a person—someone who deserves dignity, opportunity, and the possibility of change."

- "Registries label and radically destabilize people in reentry, along with all those who love and support them

Contextual Examples: People who have Experienced Sexual Harm

This section of the guide offers trauma-informed, person-first language to describe survivors of sexual harm in ways that support healing, dignity, and restoration.

It is grounded in a restorative justice framework and avoids defining people solely by their trauma.

Storytelling and Personal Narratives

- "As a person who experienced harm, I've been on a journey of healing and reclaiming my voice."
- "I'm a survivor and advocate, not just what happened to me."
- "Telling my story as a crime survivor has helped shift the narrative from punishment to healing."

Legislative Testimony

- "Survivors of crime deserve trauma-informed responses that center healing, not further harm."
- "Policies must be shaped by the needs of people who have experienced harm and what creates true safety for all people - not punitive reflexes, cultural myths or political agenda."
- "Survivors are asking for resources, prevention, and accountability —not disconnection, adversarial measures and lifelong punishment for others. I do not want injustice carried out in my name."

Contextual Examples: People Who Have Experienced Sexual Harm

Media Interviews & Public Statements

- "We lift up the voices of people impacted by sexual harm to reimagine justice and prevention."

- "Not all survivors want harsher penalties—many want real healing and community safety. We are not defined by the worst thing that ever happened to us and we do not want injustice carried out in our names."

- "People who've experienced harm deserve to define their own paths forward."

Legal Advocacy and Amicus Briefs

- "A person who was harmed may seek acknowledgment, repair, or meaningful accountability. Our adversarial criminal legal system is often ill-equipped to provide any of that."
- "Survivors must be offered choices and power in justice processes."
- "Justice should be centered on the needs of the person harmed and the humanity of all involved—not state-driven punishment that robs survivors of their agency."

Community Education & Dialogue

- "Let's center services and healing for people who've experienced sexual harm without dehumanizing others."
- "Every survivor's journey is unique—we must avoid speaking for them or assigning one narrative."
- "We can build communities where people who've caused harm and people who've been harmed can both heal after meaningful accountability and repair."