



## Fair Chance Employment Language Guide | 2023

### Overview

As part of a company's commitment to Fair Chance hiring, it is important to build common language to describe past justice involvement, designed to center on people and ensure no one is defined by their past actions.

People with criminal justice histories are subject to a broad range of dehumanizing labels that stigmatize and marginalize rather than support them while they navigate reentry and reengagement in the workforce. Job applicants and employees with prior justice system involvement should not be defined by their conviction history. The language suggestions below, first published by the Urban Institute, provide guidance on how to write and speak about people impacted by the criminal justice system— the people at the center of Fair Chance work— in a manner that reflects their personhood and does not define them by their past.

- **Be aware.** Be conscious of the power we have to represent (or misrepresent) other people's experiences.
- **Reduce stigma.** The labels used to describe people (e.g., “offender” or “criminal”) reinforce stigmatization in the workplace.
- **Consider the whole person.** People are not defined by only one experience or aspect of their identity.
- **Respect preference.** Whenever possible, we should ask the people about the language they use to identify themselves.

## Common Language

Use “people-first” language and avoid words like “felon,” “ex-con,” or other terms that primarily define people by mistakes or choices they made. “People-first” language is not about euphemisms or glossing over people's actions, rather it is about allowing individuals to reclaim their identity as people first. The following guide gives an overview of some common words and phrases to consider when discussing past justice involvement.

WORDS TO AVOID	PHRASE TO USE INSTEAD	NEW PHRASE DEFINITION
offender, inmate, felon, criminal, convict, prisoner	Person or individual who is incarcerated	Refers to anyone currently incarcerated. It makes no claim about guilt or innocence (contrary to words like “convict”), nor does it attach central identity to an often temporary status (like “prisoner” etc.) <i>Other terms to consider:</i> Person or individual with justice system involvement; Person or individual impacted by the justice system; Person or individual affected by the justice system
ex-offender, ex-con, ex-prisoner, ex-felon	Person or individual who is justice-impacted; person or individual who has been formerly incarcerated; person with a past conviction	Refers to anyone who has been detained in a carceral setting and is now released, as well as those with arrests/convictions but no incarceration history <i>Other terms to consider:</i> Person or individual with prior justice system involvement; Person or individual with justice history
parolee, probationer	Person or individual who is under supervision	Refers to anyone currently under parole or probation <i>Other terms to consider:</i> Person under community supervision; Person or individual on parole; Person or individual on probation
juvenile offender, juvenile delinquent	A youth or young person who is justice-involved	Refers to a youth who has had some involvement with the juvenile or adult criminal justice system Makes no claim about guilt or innocence, nor does it imply a history of incarceration

## Evolution of Language

- It is important to note that the content found in this guide is what the field is currently

saying. It is not an evergreen list of recommendations.

- This language continues to evolve and there will be language/phrases we use today that will be seen as outdated in 5 or 10 years.

### **Sources and References**

- Osborne: [Resources for Humanizing Language](#)
- The Fortune Society: [Words Matter Guide](#)
- Urban Institute: [People first: Changing the way we talk about those touched by the criminal justice system](#)
- The Opportunity Agenda: [Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide](#)
- Traumainformed.org hosts a broader [criminal justice terminology guide](#) to better understand words and phrases commonly used in the justice system