

# FORWARD JUSTICE

## A Guide for Language around People and Communities Directly Impacted by the Criminal Legal System

As reporters and members of the media, we know all too well the power of our words. An individual's circumstance should not define them for the rest of their life. Terms that label people by past or present convictions reduce their identity to violations and accusations rather than their humanity. Instead, describe people as people first and foremost, not by their incarceration.

**When covering or discussing issues of mass incarceration, or the criminal legal system, Forward Justice uses language that centers the humanity of the people directly impacted by the issues.** We believe that people-centered language is critical to not only humanize these issues and combat apathy, but also effectively and accurately portray these issues and the people they impact in the media and public discourse.

When discussing or referencing people who have been directly impacted by the criminal legal system, don't use classic tropes and labels. Indeed, many commonly used terms only serve to reinforce the racist power structure behind the criminal legal system when they reduce people to their convictions. Forward Justice advocates for and strongly encourages you to accurately and respectfully talk about people's identities, situations, and roles in society.

Words to Avoid	Words to Prioritize
<i>Felons</i>	<b>Directly impacted</b>
<i>Convicts</i>	<b>Currently incarcerated</b>
<i>Inmates</i>	<b>Formerly incarcerated</b>
<i>Ex-Inmates</i>	<b>People directly impacted by the criminal justice system</b>
<i>Prisoners</i>	<b>Justice-involved individuals</b>
<i>Offenders</i>	<b>People accused of a crime</b>
<i>Ex-Offenders</i>	<b>People who have committed offenses</b>
<i>Recently released convicts</i>	<b>Re-entering community members</b>
<i>Ex-Convicts</i>	<b>People</b>

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“As a person directly impacted by the criminal legal system, I know that language and labels matter. Journalists shaping the public narrative must lead with humanity when describing justice-involved communities.”

-Daryl Atkinson, Co-Director, Forward Justice

If you want to learn more, please contact Brittany Cheatam, Communications Manager at [bcheatham@forwardjustice.org](mailto:bcheatham@forwardjustice.org) or [media@forwardjustice.org](mailto:media@forwardjustice.org).

Forward Justice is a catalyst for social justice across the South and we are uniting our allies and supporters to bring justice to our communities and the country. We are empowering our community members and ensuring that they help reshape the future of the South and the nation for themselves and future generations.

Here are some recent wins from the team at Forward Justice:

- **New York Times:** [Man Pardoned After Spending 24 Years in Prison for Murder](#)
- **Washington Post:** [Judges order restoration of voting rights for more than 50,000 former felons in North Carolina](#)

Here are some of the key campaigns at Forward Justice:

- **[Unlock Our Vote:](#)** Our fight to restore Voting Rights to nearly 60,000 North Carolinians who have been disenfranchised by unconstitutional laws.
- **[COVID Decarceration:](#)** We're urging officials to take immediate, bold action to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in North Carolina jails and prisons, and save lives.
- **[End Criminal Justice Debt:](#)** Our fight to protect poor people and people of color from the exploitation inherent in the criminalization of poverty.
- **[Season of Democracy:](#)** We're working to protect our elections and expand access to our democracy to ensure that the 'we' in 'We the People' is truly inclusive and representative of ALL North Carolinians.
- **[Clean Slate:](#)** Our Clean Slate Campaign supports second chances by removing barriers to successful reentry for people who have been caught in the criminal legal system.



Learn more at [forwardjustice.org](https://forwardjustice.org) and follow us on [Twitter](#)

