

MICHIGAN COLLABORATIVE
MICEMI
to END MASS INCARCERATION

IMPACT LANGUAGE GLOSSARY
FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION





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OUR GOAL

The goal of the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration and our members is to leverage our individual and collective power in order to achieve the reduction of prison and jail populations in Michigan.

MI-CEMI members gather regularly to coordinate our efforts, collaborate with national movements working on systemic inequality and mass incarceration, mobilize people locally, and share our knowledge and expertise.

A key part of leveraging our collective power is the strength in numbers surrounding language. By using a set of consistent terms, language and phrasing, we can better win short-term campaigns and promote long-term cultural changes to support more just and effective approaches to public safety.

Collectively, we can strategically use language to shift the narratives surrounding mass incarceration and dispel myths and misconceptions.



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

This guide provides recommendations for MI-CEMI members on preferred language to help us make the greatest impact possible toward our collective goals, including:

- Overarching recommendations for all members, for maximum impact in shifting narratives.
- Language individual organizations may want to use on a case-by-case basis, based on their values and voice.
- Language that may be a better fit for a specific audience or scenario.
- Language, terms, words and phrases to avoid because of the harmful narratives they create, or because of their negative impacts on our collective goals.

AT-A-GLANCE GLOSSARY CHART

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	COLLECTIVELY SAY...	USE WITH SPECIFICITY...
Captivity. Confinement. Imprisonment. Incarceration. Penitentiary. Slang terms.	Mass incarceration.	Jail system. Prison system.
Criminal justice system. Justice system. Legal system.	Criminal legal system.	
Convict. Criminal. Felon. Inmate. Offender. Violent criminal. Violent offender.	Incarcerated person. Incarcerated individual. Person/individual who is incarcerated. Person convicted of...	Prisoner. Person affected by the justice system. Person impacted by the justice system. Person with justice system involvement.
Convicted criminal. Ex-con. Ex-felon. Ex-inmate. Ex-offender.	Formerly incarcerated person. Formerly incarcerated individual. Person/individual who was formerly incarcerated. Person convicted of...	Person affected by the justice system. Person impacted by the justice system. Person with a history of justice system involvement. Returning citizen.
Justice-involved.	Select the phrase best clarifying the person or system you are trying to describe such as incarcerated person, court system or police.	



LANGUAGE GLOSSARY FOR MI-CEMI MEMBERS

TERMS, WORDS AND PHRASES INCLUDED IN THIS GLOSSARY:

- Criminal justice system/legal system.
- Formerly incarcerated person.
- Incarcerated person.
- Justice-involved.
- Mass incarceration.



WHEN DISCUSSING MASS INCARCERATION:

Merriam-Webster defines incarceration as "confinement in a jail or prison, the act of imprisoning someone or the state of being imprisoned." When we add "mass" to incarceration, we dramatically change its meaning.

The Institute to End Mass Incarceration explains mass incarceration as a reflection of three related concepts: the U.S.'s enormous, racist carceral system; a network of social forces, institutions and actors; and a broad set of harms inflicted far beyond prison.

TERMS TO **ELIMINATE** FROM NARRATIVES

- Penitentiary.
- Slang terms such as slammer, lock-up, clink.

WHY?

Penitentiary is an outdated term, while slang terms normalize the system and can make it seem more casual than it is.

TERMS TO USE WITH **CAUTION/SPECIFICITY**

- Captivity.
- Confinement.
- Imprisonment.
- Incarceration.

WHY?

These terms focus on the state of being for people who are incarcerated, not the complex system in which they are suffering.

TERMS TO USE WITH **CAUTION/SPECIFICITY**

- Jail system.
- Prison system.

WHY?

Often terms describing the physical buildings (prison, jail) are used to describe what is a massively complicated system rooted in racism and harm. These terms focus on the place, not its impacts or the people.



MI-CEMI **RECOMMENDS** THE USE OF THE PHRASE **MASS INCARCERATION**

WHY?

Mass incarceration combines the well-recognized term of incarceration with a small but powerful modification to reflect one of the most important issues in the criminal legal system: the massive number of people impacted. As the Brennan Center puts it, “other countries do not use prison as a one-size-fits-all solution to crime.” Use of the term “mass” reminds people the U.S. incarcerates more people than any nation in the world, and is the leader in prison population rate.

If there is concern mass incarceration will not resonate with a specific audience, incarceration is a suitable alternative.



WHEN DISCUSSING THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM:

The criminal justice system is often used as a catch-all term, used interchangeably for the different parts and components ranging from police to courts to prisons and parole. Cornell Law School's [Legal Information Institute](#) defines a legal system as, "a procedure or process for interpreting and enforcing the law."

Hundreds of legal systems exist internationally, further creating opportunities for confusion or misinterpretation.



TERMS TO **ELIMINATE** FROM NARRATIVES

- Criminal justice system.
- Justice system.

WHY?

The most problematic element of the phrase criminal justice system is the implication that the system is just. As [Vera Institute of Justice](#), a national organization partnering with communities and leaders for change, notes in [an article with dozens of substantiating data points](#), “‘criminal justice system’ is a misnomer. Throughout history and across the world, false language has facilitated the systemic, inhumane treatment of groups of people. [...] Words shape how people think, and our speech should recognize that our system of racially biased policing and draconian punishment is not just. Instead, it destroys countless lives and wastes resources, while failing to ensure public safety.”

TERMS TO USE WITH CAUTION/SPECIFICITY

- Carceral system.
- Court system.
- Criminal injustice system.
- Criminal punishment system.
- Jail system.
- Judicial system.
- Legal system.
- Prison system.

WHY?

- Massive confusion exists surrounding the different elements of the criminal legal system. Those working within and discussing the criminal legal system should not assume the audience understands the context and nuances. It's important to be intentional in using criminal legal system only when describing the broad system.
- Researchers at the University of Denver's [Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System](#) conducting a review of existing studies were [struck by one researcher's observation](#), "Public trust and confidence in the system is low because people don't understand how our judiciary works. The public can't name a single Supreme Court justice, and they think Judge Judy is what it's like to go to court. Civics education is virtually non-existent these days. Of course the public's trust in the system is not where we want it to be. How can you trust something you don't fully understand?"
- Criminal punishment system and criminal injustice system are terms growing in popularity among advocates, but it may alienate some audiences. They should be used with intention depending on the context and audience.



MI-CEMI **RECOMMENDS** USE OF THE PHRASE **CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM**

WHY?

Criminal legal system removes the implication our current system is just, and provides language that encompasses all aspects of a broad system. Criminal legal system serves as a plurality term that encompasses the most in a relatively non-polarizing way.

ADDITIONALLY:

- Those working within and discussing the criminal legal system should not assume the audience understands the context and nuances. It's important to be intentional in using criminal legal system only when describing the broad system.
- MI-CEMI recommends specifying which system is being discussed rather than using criminal legal system to describe a single component. Court system, jail system, prison system, juvenile justice system, parole system, probation system, etc. should always be used if that specific system is being referenced.



WHEN DESCRIBING CURRENTLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS/ PEOPLE:

When we speak with person-centered language, we respect each individual's dignity, worth, unique qualities and strengths. The words we use to describe a person contribute significantly to their self-image and identity, as well as how others perceive them.

TERMS TO **ELIMINATE** FROM NARRATIVES

- Criminal.
- Convict.
- Felon.
- Inmate.
- Offender.
- Violent criminal.
- Violent offender.

WHY?

The terms listed above are deficit-framed (defining people by their problems), instead of person-centered, or asset-framed (defining people by their aspirations and contributions). The stigma associated with these labels reinforces the othering of a portion of our population. By removing labels that reduce our neighbors and community members to lesser beings, our community becomes more inclusive.

TERMS TO USE WITH **CAUTION/SPECIFICITY**

- Prisoner.

WHY?

Some people still hold harmful stereotypes surrounding the term, however, it is considered by many organizations to be an acceptable alternative to incarcerated person and can be used when preferred or based on the audience.

TERMS TO USE WITH CAUTION/SPECIFICITY

- Person affected by the justice system.
- Person impacted by the justice system.
- Person with justice system involvement.

WHY?

These terms can leave ambiguity as to who we're truly referencing and could describe people who have been accused of a crime, people who have been convicted for a time, incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, police, legal staff, judges, family members, victims and more.

MI-CEMI RECOMMENDS USE OF THE PHRASE INCARCERATED PERSON.

- It is also acceptable to use incarcerated individual, or person/individual who is incarcerated.
- Person convicted of... can be helpful when striving for specificity.

WHY?

- Incarcerated person focuses on the human. It separates the person from their status at this moment, and keeps the narrative focused on the human, not the physical place in the way prisoner does. By using "person" with a qualifying word, incarcerated person separates one's identity from their incarcerated status, as opposed to a single word that defines the person (think "offender" or "criminal").
- It's recommended "currently" be added to incarcerated – currently incarcerated – when needed for specificity from formerly incarcerated people or others. For example, "We support comprehensive substance use treatment for people who are currently and formerly incarcerated."



WHEN DESCRIBING FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS/ PEOPLE:

Formerly incarcerated differs from the term incarcerated in that it denotes the time someone was incarcerated as in the past, and provides room for them to move beyond their incarceration. It also is used as a descriptor, but not an identity. The length and cumbersome nature of the phrase, however, often leads to people using other, shorter terms, resulting in de-humanizing and problematic language that reinforces negative stereotypes.

TERMS TO **ELIMINATE** FROM NARRATIVES

- Convicted criminal.
- Ex-con.
- Ex-felon.
- Ex-inmate.
- Ex-offender.

WHY?

These terms are founded on the assumption that this population is a deficit in our society, which leads to the mistreatment of this class of people. These terms forever tie their identity to their incarceration.

TERMS TO USE WITH **CAUTION/SPECIFICITY**

- Justice-involved person.
- Person affected by the justice system.
- Person impacted by the justice system.
- Person with a history of justice system involvement.
- Returning citizen.

WHY?

- Despite their good intentions, these terms can dilute the focus and specificity that has already been established, resulting in a broader and less impactful effect on people.
- Additionally, for those not familiar with these terms, they could be confused as to what it means to have involvement in the justice system. Does justice-involved include those who have been victims of crime? Judges? Witnesses?
- Veterans are also referred to as “returning citizens” in certain contexts, resulting in the chance for confusion or misinformation.



MI-CEMI **RECOMMENDS** THE USE OF THE PHRASE **FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSON.**

- It is also acceptable to use formerly incarcerated individual, or person/individual who was formerly incarcerated.
- Person convicted of... can be helpful when striving for specificity.

WHY?

We use formerly incarcerated person to recognize individuals as humans and honor their human capacity and right to thrive, and to exist in their communities as equal to their neighbors. As a whole, formerly incarcerated person focuses heavily on putting someone's prison experience in the rear view and focusing more on who the person is at this point in time.



WHEN USING THE TERM JUSTICE- INVOLVED:

The term justice-involved is becoming more prevalent, even appearing as the recommended person-first language from respected organizations in the industry such as LINC. The American Conservative points out a valid concern, however: “If I said to you ‘What is a ‘justice-involved individual,’ you might think, ‘a cop’ or ‘a lawyer’...” A single definition of justice-involved is difficult to find, with Law Insider defining it as, “Justice-involved means anyone who is convicted, has been convicted, or has been incarcerated” but Wiktionary defining it as, “having had interactions with the criminal justice system as a defendant.”

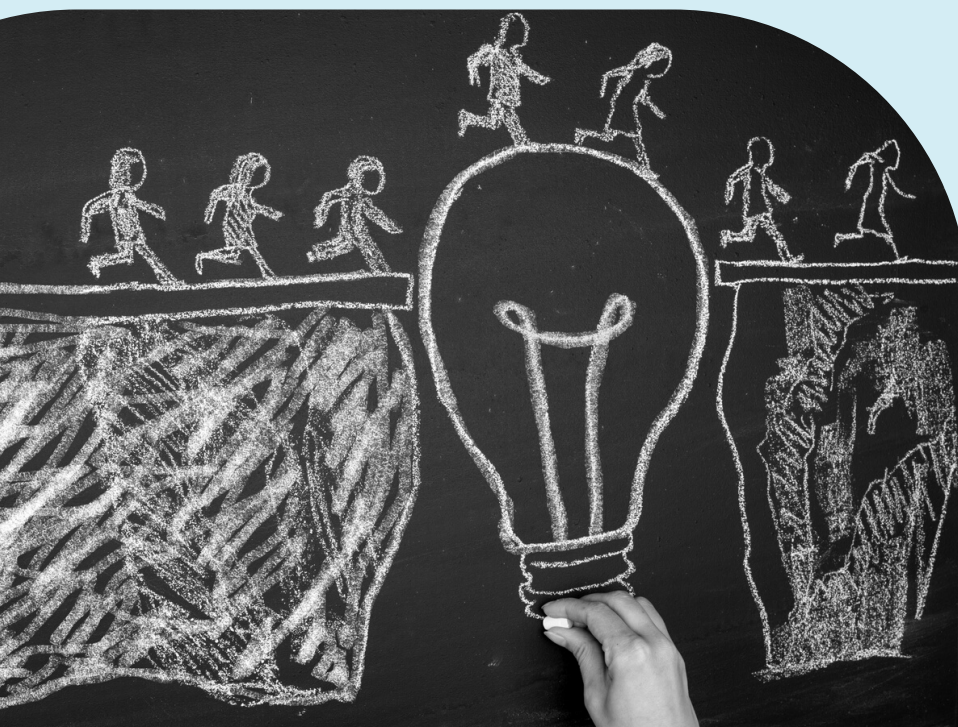
While the broadness of justice-involved can be its appeal, it also means the term can include everything from the youth justice system, law enforcement, courts and prisons, to a person who is stopped and searched but does not receive a ticket.

TERMS TO USE WITH CAUTION/SPECIFICITY

- Justice-involved person/individual.
- People involved in the justice process.
- Person, people or individual(s) affected by the justice system.
- Person, people or individual(s) impacted by the justice system.
- Person, people or individual(s) with a history of justice system involvement.
- People who are justice-involved.

ADDITIONALLY:

The term justice-involved, if used, should be used with audiences with whom the term is already familiar. As it grows in popularity, there are times it may be contextually appropriate to use justice-involved or a variation with criminal legal system organizations, nonprofits and teams, but for media and public audiences, it should be avoided.





CLARIFYING LANGUAGE AND ADDING SPECIFICITY

MI-CEMI RECOMMENDS THE USE OF THE PHRASE BEST CLARIFYING THE PEOPLE OR SYSTEM YOU ARE TRYING TO DESCRIBE.

THIS COULD INCLUDE:

- Carceral system.
- Children.
- Court system.
- Criminal legal system.
- Defendant.
- District attorneys.
- Formerly incarcerated person.
- Incarcerated person.
- Jail system.
- Judges.
- Judicial system.
- Juvenile justice system.
- Parole system.
- People on parole.
- Person accused of a crime.
- Person charged with a criminal offense.
- Police.
- Prison system.
- Prosecuting attorneys.
- Prosecutors.
- Sheriffs.

WHY?

Rather than take the chance of confusion or ambiguity, use the term criminal legal system to describe the system as a whole, or specify which group of people or system you are describing.



MASS INCARCERATION COMMUNICATION SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

LANGUAGE TOOLS AND RESOURCES:

- [Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide: Five Tips For Language That Changes Heart & Mind](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Language—Resources for Humanizing Language](#), by Osborne
- [Media Guide: 10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don'ts](#), The Sentencing Project
- [Moving Forward: Three Ideas for Talking About the Moment](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Talking About Due Process and Racial Profiling](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Talking About Justice and Equity through Sports](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Talking Points: Crime](#), Safe and Just Michigan
- [Talking Points: Rise in Homicides/Domestic Violence](#), Safe and Just Michigan
- [Terminology | ATSA](#), Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers
- [The Language Project](#), The Marshall Project
- [Unlock the Box Communications Plan](#), Unlock the Box
- [Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Why Is the Word “Felon” Being Taken Out of Our Vocabulary?](#), Leading Into New Communities
- [Words Matter: Don't Call People Felons, Convicts, or Inmates](#), Vera Institute of Justice
- [Words Matter](#), The Fortune Society Reentry Education Project
- [Words Matter: Using Humanizing Language](#), The Fortune Society

STYLE AND STANDARDS GUIDES:

- [A Progressive's Style Guide](#), Sum of Us
- [Changing the Narrative Style Guide](#), The Action Lab at the Center for Health Policy and Law
 - [Changing the Narrative, Justice-Involved People](#), The Action Lab at the Center for Health Policy and Law
- [Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups and Communities](#), CDC
- [The Marshall Project Style Guide](#)

MESSAGING-FOCUSED ARTICLES AND REPORTS:

- [A New Sensibility: An Analysis of Public Opinion Research on Attitudes Towards Crime and Criminal Justice Policy](#), Transforming the System
- [As more media adopt 'person-first' language for incarcerated people, advocates say that's just a start](#), Prism
- [Changing the language around incarceration](#), Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute University of Missouri
- [Changing the Narrative on Criminal Justice: Michiganders Ready for Reform](#)
- ['Ex-Con,' 'Ex-Offender' and 'Ex-Inmate' Are Words That Reduce Millions to Stereotype](#), The Root
- [Language matters for justice reform](#), The Hill
- [Mass Incarceration and the Problem of Language](#), by The Atlantic
- [Opinion: How the Language of Criminal Justice Inflicts Lasting Harm](#), Washington Post
- [People-First Language Matters. So Does the Rest of the Story.](#) by Wilbert L. Cooper
- [Persons Instead of Prisoners: Durham Commissioners Approve 'People-First' Resolution](#), Indyweek.com
- [Shifting the Narrative](#), The Opportunity Agenda
 - [Narrative Shift and the Campaign to End Racial Profiling](#)
 - [Narrative Shift and the Death Penalty](#)
- [Words matter: a call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration](#), by BMC International Health and Human Rights



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