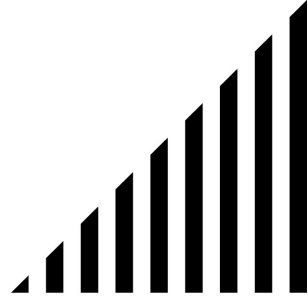


January 20, 2022

Bart Richards Award  
Penn State, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications  
115 Carnegie Building  
University Park, PA 16802



To the Richards Award judges:

Journalists have long assumed that descriptors like “inmate,” “felon” and “offender” are clear and neutral terms. Activists have long argued that these words are dehumanizing.


Through our reporting and our growing engagement with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated readers, we have come to acknowledge that the stigma and material consequences of imprisonment are so deep that what may seem like basic terms to journalists can be permanent, potentially life-altering labels. The Language Project is a collection of personal essays, interviews and a style guidance that promotes language that is clear, effective and free of euphemism and provides alternatives to the traditional labels using the logic of “people first” language.

Take “inmate,” a word applied to anyone held in a correctional facility. We know that 74 percent of people in U.S. jails have not been convicted of a crime. Calling someone in jail an “inmate” in an article consigns them to a criminal identity, even if they are innocent. And that article will likely be the first result in an internet search of that person’s name.

In addition, we’ve learned that in some regions, calling someone an “inmate” is tantamount to calling them a “snitch” or even the n-word. If a segment of our audience reads a descriptor as a slur, it ceases to be useful in our work. While it is longer, it is simply more accurate to describe someone as “a 34-year-old in Rikers Island Jail” than a “Rikers Island inmate.”

The Language Project was designed to give journalists the incentive and tools to replace common descriptors such as “inmates,” “felons” and “offenders” with “people first” alternatives such as “incarcerated people,” “people convicted of felonies” and “people charged with sex offenses.” We tackled this issue because we’d repeatedly heard from people with direct experience with incarceration that the descriptors are dehumanizing, create a permanent criminal identity and fail to capture the complexities of the criminal justice system. For example, many people convicted of crimes are also victims of it. The overwhelming majority of people in U.S. jails have not been convicted. The racism and classism embedded in the system challenge journalists to avoid generic language that flattens individual stories.

We included multiple perspectives to drive the point home that The Language Project is rooted in journalism rather than advocacy. The personal essays from formerly incarcerated people represented the most common critique of these descriptors. The as-told-to by the former corrections officer revealed the power dynamics attached to these words. The interview with the academic examines how the media shapes public perception. The imprisoned journalist’s essay showed why incarcerated people are not a monolith on this issue.



This project is a hard sell for some. Any style rule that requires journalists to use additional words could be perceived as a burden. Also, traditional police and crime reporters tend to shy away from anything that suggests they are sugar-coating crime or humanizing criminals out of respect for victims and survivors.

To unpack The Language Project, we did a webinar with Poynter attended by more than 300 people. Responses from attendees who contacted us afterwards were overwhelmingly positive. Other promotional efforts: interviews with “On The Media” and Boston’s WGBH; a virtual forum for our members; and multiple email blasts and social media postings.

The most common indication of impact has come from journalists. The standards editor at a major daily told us that he and his team are now contemplating the issue rather than writing it off as advocacy. We heard from a reporter at a major magazine that their newsroom was abuzz about the package because they had been grappling with negative feedback about their language use. And then there’s the following email from a New Jersey crime reporter:

“I cover New Jersey prisons and could never figure out why I’d get grumpy notes from readers after I used the word [inmate] in my stories—until TMP changed its standards and you walked us through why in that Poynter webinar.

I don’t think our news organization as a whole has changed its standards, but I’ve let my editors know I’ll stop using the word in my stories. I anticipate some headline fights in the future, but I haven’t received any pushback and it’s been surprisingly easy to find other synonyms to use.”

Journalists are not ones for making big pronouncements or adopting rules. It’s the daily, inward-facing interactions that shape our field. That’s why we believe this kind of impact is the most important.

Ultimately, The Language Project advocates for an incontrovertible fact—that people in prison or jail are people. Journalism is a discipline of clarity. If we fall back on labels, we are not doing our best work.

Thank you for considering this work for the Bart Richards Award for Media Criticism.

Sincerely,  
Susan Chira  
Editor-in-Chief  
The Marshall Project