

Community Restorative Centre **Language Guide-** **Version 2**

Aims of this resource

Community Restorative Centre (CRC) developed the *Community Restorative Centre Language Guide* to support the development of language as a practice tool to empower people impacted by the criminal legal system and to resist the stigma of criminal legal system involvement. This is not a definitive guide, but rather a starting-off point, or tool, for ongoing development.

The Term ‘Criminal Legal System’

In this resource, CRC uses the language of ‘criminal legal system’ as opposed to ‘criminal justice system’. By ‘criminal legal system’ CRC is referring to the way the ‘justice system’ in Australia has been illegally imposed through settler colonialism, without consent from First Nations communities. The terminology of ‘criminal legal system’ also recognises the way legal mechanisms in Australia (for example, policing, courts and prisons) often fail to deliver ‘just’ outcomes for communities, and that this failure is a systemic, rather than a one-off, issue.

By using the language of ‘criminal legal system’ we seek to validate the lived realities of people’s encounters with the criminal legal system, in addition to recognising the ongoing harms of settler colonial institutions in Australia.

Why language matters

Language is connected to place, carrying with it traces of our cultural and environmental influences, evident in the words, accents and jargon we use every day. Language is also implicated in structures of power that shape our social systems. In recognising these points, we would like to respectfully acknowledge the over 250 languages that were spoken around the time of white invasion,¹ and pay our respects to First Nations people impacted by loss of language, and those involved in language continuation and restoration.

Cultivating awareness of our language is not about being “politically correct.” Rather, in the contexts that we work, it’s part of a practice which recognises the link between the language we use, and the distribution of power and resources to people whose lives have been impacted by the criminal legal system.

That being said, it’s important to acknowledge that all of us have language habits that can be hard to break, and to treat each other with compassion as we develop our language practices.

Language not only *assigns meaning*;

Language can *position* us in relation to, or *define* us by our circumstances:

Think about the difference between using “inmate” – a label which defines someone by their current circumstances and “person who is currently in custody” – which describes a person in their current context

Language can *effect change*:

Think of a magistrate handing down a court sentence (I sentence the defendant to...)

The retraction or omission of language can *other*, *invisibilise* and *dehumanise*:

¹ Common Ground: First Nations Languages (accessed 26 November 2025). Retrieved from: <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/indigenous-languages-avoiding-a-silent-future>

Think about the use of Master Index Numbers (MINs) in place of someone's name

Conversely, language can *facilitate belonging*, recognise and welcome our differences

Think about when we acknowledge people with lived experience of incarceration

Language can *lift people up*; using language we can affirm agency, dignity and worth

Bottom Line

Fear of stigma and being labelled can and does prevent people from accessing support.
Considerate language helps develop respectful relationships and address power imbalances.

Guiding Principles

Be mindful of using language that is:

- Inclusive, respectful and non-judgemental
- Accessible, clear and free of jargon
- Person-centred, emphasise the person first; **“person who is in custody”**
- Strengths-based; **focus on the persons strengths, skills and passions**
- Affirming of people's agency, choices and preferences; **“would rather look for other options” rather than “non-compliant”**
- Recovery-oriented; **shifting the emphasis from pathology and suffering to resilience and healing**

Avoid:

- ‘us’ and ‘them’ language: **“we’re just trying to keep them alive”**
- Deficit-focused language
- Defining someone by a diagnosis or conviction; **“he’s a schizophrenic” / “parolee”**
- Stigmatising and de-humanising language; **“person in custody” rather than “offender”**
- Acronyms, particularly where they refer to a group of people; **“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” rather than “ATSI”**
- Sensationalising someone's experience of, or time in prison; **“spent time in solitary confinement” rather than “did time in the hole”**
- Language that reinforces harmful stereotypes, encourages judgement, blames or shames; **“junkie” “criminal”**
- Paternalistic and patronising language; **“providing a program for people in custody” rather than “helping disadvantaged people in prison”**

Practice Guidelines

- Cultivate self-awareness
- Speak as if there are people with lived experience in the room
- Seek people's preferences around the use of language and respect these **“What’s the best way for me to refer to you whilst we’re working together?”**
- Support people to step into a comfortable level of disclosure about their identities and experiences
- Remember language is personal and contextual- terms that are preferred by some may be stigmatising to others
- Remember that words aren't the only way we communicate, body language matters too

Key Terms

Criminal Justice	
Try this	Instead of this
Person who is incarcerated, person in prison/custody, person in contact with the criminal legal system	Prisoner, inmate, criminal, felon, thug, convict
Person who has been charged/sentenced/convicted of a crime	Offender
Person with previous convictions who has been charged/sentenced/convicted of a crime	Re-offender
Person who has been charged with a crime	Defendant
Person who was formerly incarcerated, person with lived experience of incarceration, person who was in contact with the criminal legal system	Ex-prisoner/inmate/criminal/felon/con/offender; thug, post-carceral
Person who was not/who has been convicted of a crime	Innocent/guilty
Person who has/has not been convicted of a violent crime	Violent/non-violent
Person who has been convicted/charged with serious offences relating to...	"Worst of the worst", violent offender
Person/people who require a high level of support, person/people who are... (e.g. sharing needles/having condomless sex), name the population group (e.g. people who inject drugs)	High risk client, high(er) risk group
Person on parole/probation	Parolee, probationer
Patient, person in treatment	Prisoner-patient
Person on hunger strike	Hunger-striker
Solitary confinement	Dungeon, hole
Person without documentation, resident without legal permission	Illegal immigrant, illegal/undocumented alien, visa over-stayer
Sex worker, person involved in sex work/in sale of trade of sexual services	Prostitute, hustler
Mental Health	
Try this	Instead of this
Person living with a mental health condition	Crazy, mental, insane, psycho, mentally ill, emotionally disturbed
Person with a lived experience of/person who has been diagnosed with...	Person is (e.g. schizophrenic, a bipolar, has PTSD)
Suicided, died by suicide	Committed suicide
Took or ended their own life	Successful/completed suicide
Non-fatal attempt at suicide/attempt to end their own life	Failed attempt/unsuccessful suicide

Alcohol and Other Drugs ²	
Try this	Instead of this
Substance use, non-prescribed use	Abuse, misuse, problem use, non-compliant use
Person who uses/injects drugs	Drug user/abuser
Person who is experiencing drug dependence/person with a dependence on...	Addict , junkie, druggie, alcoholic
Person with lived experience of drug dependence	Ex-addict , former addict, used to be a...
Currently using drugs	Using again, fallen off the wagon, had a setback
Person who has stopped using drugs	Clean, sober , drug-free
No longer using drugs	Stayed clean, maintained recovery
Treatment has not been effective/person chooses not to engage in the treatment	Not engaged, non-compliant
Would rather look for other options	History of non-compliance
Positive/negative urine drug screen	Dirty/clean urine
Used/unused syringe	Dirty/clean needle, dirties
Domestic and Family Violence	
Try this	Instead of this
Identify the context and responsibility	Victim blaming
Recognise acts of protection and resistance to violence	Relying on the victim/perpetrator binary
Person who is a victim/survivor of [domestic violence], person escaping domestic violence	Victim/survivor
Person who used violence	Perpetrator
Victim/survivor of sexualised violence	Victim/survivor of sexual assault
LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic and more)	
Try this	Instead of this
Respectfully ask what terms people use to describe themselves, then use those terms	Make assumptions about a person's identity, relationship/s or body
Ask about someone's pronouns e.g. she/her, they/them or he/him or if you're unsure, use neutral pronouns or the person's name	Assume someone's pronouns
Everyone, folks, honoured guests	Ladies and gentlemen
People leaving prison	Men and women leaving prison
All genders	Men and women

Please note, some people and groups in community may choose to use the words in **bold** from a strengths and identity-based perspective. The choice of using these words to self-identify is up to the person. This guide supports people to use language that is empowering and feels right for them. However, it is not recommended for workers to use these words to describe someone's experience.

² The Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA) and The NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) (2025). Language Matters-version 2. Retrieved from: nada.org.au/resources/language-matters

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