

Mourning Our Losses

Language Policy

Crime Information

Mourning Our Losses (MOL) believes that no one deserves to die behind bars. We reject constructs of deservedness altogether by not using crime language or mentioning crimes for which some of us have been convicted. This is because:

- even a brief mention of crime justifies the inequities experienced by people incarcerated;
- those in power use irrelevant information about particular convictions to justify the deaths of those who die in their custody;
- stigma is perpetuated by how our society is conditioned to respond to crime; and
- mentioning crimes of conviction divides us and further stigmatizes some.
 - The mention of a “wrongful” conviction emphasizes that other convictions and sentences are “right.”
 - Describing the event that saw one person to prison as “non-violent” further stigmatizes those who might have been involved in a “violent” event by inaccurately equating the *PERSON* with the terms ‘non-violent’ and ‘violent.’
 - Giving specifics about a past freeworld situation that “could have happened to anybody” ostracizes others who are in the same carceral situation presently.

Language

MOL rejects the use of institutional language devised and/or adopted for the explicit purpose of othering and dehumanizing us. Words like “inmate,” “offender,” “convict,” “felon,” and “murderer” have no place in our community because:

- these words ignore the reality that we are human beings;
- these words reduce us to one negative label ascribed by a system that has an interest in continually disenfranchising us; and
- these words stifle our capabilities and potential.

Even socially-accepted phrases containing these words are NEVER okay (e.g. "John is a sex offender" or "Eric is a convicted murderer").

“Prisoner” can be iffy. Often, those of us who have been in prison will use it to reinforce the concept of being physically bound, but when outsiders use it in an othering way it can echo negative connotations and even be condescending.

Language usage is a creative endeavor that evolves over time. It defines and expresses our personal and collective views and, through written language, we make a record of lives as they are

lived. For MOL that encompasses the lives of our siblings who have died, those of us still stuck inside, and those of us who bear witness to the effects of American enslavement.

We have all used harsh language against others and even ourselves at some point. That's why we encourage **ongoing reflection** of how we *regard* each other. For further reference, MOL recommends reading the views expressed by Eddie Ellis in his [Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language](#) and those of Tran et al. (2018) in "[Words Matter](#)."

Person vs. "Incarcerated Person"

Though using terms like "incarcerated person," "formerly incarcerated person," or "directly impacted person" is factually accurate and better than "inmate" or "offender," incorporating these into our vocabulary does little more than prioritize political correctness and substitute terrible words for less terrible ones. We have to remember that these terms are still institutional creations, largely fostered by academia, which form a specific label intended to define a certain group of us.

If for some, rare reason you *have* to denote a person's situation, try using actual person-first language. **Person first** means the noun, rather than some label adjective, comes first in sequential word order (e.g. a "woman incarcerated at..." or "man who was incarcerated when...").

Reporters have often complained that it takes too many words to substitute "inmate." Yet many of the same reporters go out of their way to put unnecessary, **offensive adjectives** before the more apt "person," "individual," "man," or "woman." As an MOL volunteer pointed out, consider the stigma of "prison artist" versus "artist." To the volunteer, the former implies that her work is of a lesser quality than others.' When someone is memorialized on our site there should be an assumption that they lived or worked behind bars. Reiterating carceral status becomes an awkward, unnecessary redundancy that takes away from the conversational tone. Leave the extra adjectives out.

Take the opportunity to celebrate the person's life by referring to them as a *person* - with no disclaimers - every chance you have. Use labels that shed a positive light and help paint the picture of who the person was - i.e. a musician, poet, student, athlete, minister, writer, father, sister.

For good practice, remember to **just call people people** wherever possible.

It's the Law

The same **legal framework** used to criminalize so many of us is also used to challenge our personhood. Discriminations are written into our laws which, in many state and federal statutes, still boldly differentiate "offender or person," "person or inmate." In legal writing, the word **or** "introduces alternatives" ([Adams & Kaye](#), 2007, p. 1181), meaning the two words in these phrases are not synonymous. Written this way, these laws literally claim that we are not people.

While the subjugating "inmate" and "offender" pop up most frequently in labor and corrections laws, "felon" is the marking used against us after the sentence has been served. Legislators have

gone to great lengths to scrape most traces of “person” from all laws regulating the lives of those who have been criminalized. The terms change periodically, but the intentional, ‘alternative to person’ message remains clear.

Consider the history of this legal framework. As [Miriam Kaba](#) reminds us,

Prisons are an iteration of structural racism in the United States, which allows some people to be treated as less than human and therefore reasonably subject to all manner of exploitation, torture, and abuse ... Even when the system ensnares a non-Black person, the prison-industrial complex remains a structurally anti-Black apparatus... (Kaba, 2021, p. 60)

It is the field of law itself that legalizes racism so completely. [Linda Faye Williams](#) (2003) noted that, not blatant racists, but “institutions and structural mechanisms and public policy maintain [white privilege]” (p. 12). [Alexander Brown](#) (2019) warned about how the mere use of racist words “amount to the performance of an illocutionary act of enslavement,” and how the law enables this (p. 164). The same goes for words commonly applied to people who have been criminalized and incarcerated.

People in corrections and attorney advocates on both sides use and cite “offender,” “inmate,” and “felon” because those words trickle down from our laws and are embedded in their policies. Judges continue to write case law rife with racial biases and discriminatory undertones ([Rice et al.](#), 2019). And as of 2020, casebook publishers are still doing their dangerous part to *teach* aspiring law students that this bad language is acceptable. **It is not acceptable.** If history has taught us anything, it’s that the law’s inclusion of othering, stigmatizing language doesn’t justify its use; it just means we haven’t done the work to change those laws and policies yet.

MOL believes in doing our part to respect, honor, and show deserved dignity to every person. We reject efforts to dehumanize, socially and legally, and know that speaking and writing truth in numbers will eventually force the legislators, governors, and lawyers who serve us to acknowledge that truth as well.

Symbols

MOL condemns all racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, and movements that oppress individuals based on their identities. We will not publish any speech or symbols associated with ideologies or movements that advance these goals.

MOL also believes in the abolition of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. We will not publish any speech or symbols that glorify the criminal system in any way.