



# CSRC LANGUAGE GUIDE

**Words and Phrases to Effect Positive  
Change in Community Supervision  
Agencies**

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## About the CSRC

The Community Supervision Resource Center (CSRC) serves pretrial, probation, and parole supervision agencies and helps them align their operations with best and evidence-based practices. The CSRC supports state, local, and tribal jurisdictions and agencies in implementing supervision policies, programs, and practices that promote successful outcomes and ensure public safety. Through centralizing resources, offering training, and providing technical assistance, the CSRC will strengthen agency practices and build a network of practitioners committed to pursuing innovative, equitable, and best practices.

The CSRC is managed by the Center for Effective Public Policy, in partnership with the American Probation and Parole Association, the Association of Paroling Authorities International, the Center for Justice Innovation, and the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies. It is funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

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The Center for Effective Public Policy (CEPP) manages the CSRC. CEPP is a national nonprofit that helps practitioners, policymakers, and communities reimagine a justice system that works for all. CEPP works on projects across the spectrum of the criminal justice system—from pretrial to sentencing, as well as corrections, probation, parole, and reintegration.

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# Introduction

As the community supervision field continues to evolve, focus has turned away from managing failure toward promoting success. In doing so, it is important to consider the language that practitioners use in daily operations so that written and verbal communications are aligned with this shift in focus. The words we use matter. Changing how we speak and communicate about community supervision is a foundational strategy to improve client and agency outcomes, center the people on supervision, and realize the system advancements we want to achieve.

The CSRC Language Guide is designed to help pretrial, probation, and parole practitioners understand, identify, and use person-first language. Person-first language is a way to emphasize the person and view a status, disorder, disease, condition, or disability as only one part of the whole person: what the person “has” rather than what the person “is.” Person-first language avoids using labels or adjectives to define someone. For example, people in prison versus prisoners, and people with mental illnesses versus the mentally ill.

In addition, the guide offers community supervision practitioners alternative language to use instead of some traditional terms that imply disproportionate punitiveness; this helps to shift the focus toward helping people achieve supervision success and positive outcomes.

This guide is intended to assist community supervision staff, leaders, and agencies in adopting preferred language in their verbal and written communications moving forward. Expecting agencies to change language in all content previously produced and distributed is not realistic. However, when agencies create new content or review older content, such as publications, websites, and policies, the language suggested in this guide may be of interest.

Language is complicated, and what is deemed acceptable often depends on the audience, individual preference, and cultural influences. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to use traditional terminology. If there is doubt regarding the appropriate language to use, seeking the preferences of those with whom you are communicating can help alleviate tension and clear a path for open dialogue on the traditional terms and reasons for using alternatives.

Change often happens slowly and incrementally and can initially feel awkward. Community supervision agencies might benefit from communicating and entering into discussions with their staff and the people they supervise about their reasons for shifting their collective language to center people first.

# People and Communities

The terms in the left-hand column are commonly used to describe individuals, groups, and communities that are most directly impacted by crime and the criminal justice system. The right-hand column provides alternative language that can minimize stigmatization and dehumanization.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
Both genders	All genders
Brain-damaged	Person with a brain injury
Caretaker	Caregiver Care provider Care partner
Dangerous neighborhoods	Communities experiencing high levels of violence Communities more likely to experience violence Communities impacted by systemic/structural violence
Disabled	Person living with a disability
Elderly; senior citizens	Older adults Aging adults
Handicapped	Person living with disability
Homeless	Person who is homeless Person needing housing Person who is unhoused
Illegal immigrant	Person without immigration documentation
Individual(s); persons	Person; people
Inner city	Urban community/area
LGBT	LGBTQIA+ community  <b>Note:</b> LGBTQIA is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual. The “+” represents other sexual identities within this diverse spectrum.
Normal	Person without disabilities Nondisabled person Neurotypical person

<p>Poor/at-risk neighborhoods Vulnerable groups Marginalized</p>	<p>Underserved communities Communities disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system and other institutions Communities that are economically disadvantaged Communities experiencing chronic disinvestment</p>
<p>Poverty-stricken Poor people</p>	<p>People/households with lower incomes People experiencing poverty</p>
<p>Racial disparity</p>	<p>Unequal justice/treatment/opportunities/outcomes based on race and ethnicity</p> <p><b>Note:</b> There will be times when using “racial disparity” is appropriate, but there will also be occasions when speaking about the cause, rather than the outcome, can help bring focus to strategies to eliminate disparities. Disparate outcomes in criminal justice can be found at the arrest, jail, pretrial, and sentencing intercepts. Understanding how social determinants of justice, such as economic stability, health, housing, education, systemic racism, and implicit biases, contribute to unequal treatment can help us address the factors leading to the overrepresentation of minority groups in the criminal justice system. Applying a racial equity lens to policy, practices, and programs helps us better understand and address these root causes to improve outcomes for groups with differing experiences.</p>
<p>Young adult</p>	<p>Emerging adult (approximately 18–25 years old)</p> <p><b>Note:</b> This term more accurately describes the period of development between adolescence and adulthood.</p>

# Behavioral Health

The following terms are commonly used when describing mental health or substance use disorders. It is preferable to use terms that are respectful and to limit the use of labels. When communicating with people on supervision who have a substance use disorder, mental health concern, or both, asking them what language they prefer is a respectful way to begin communicating.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
Abuse	Use (when referring to illicit drugs) Misuse or Used other than prescribed
Addict; drug abuser; junkie; user	Person with a substance use disorder (SUD) Person with an opioid use disorder (OUD) Patient Person in active use (use the person's name, and then say "is in active use")
Alcohol abuse	Alcohol misuse  <b>Note:</b> This phrase is applicable when referring broadly to drinking in a manner, situation, amount, or frequency that could cause harm to the person who is drinking or to those around them.
Alcohol poisoning	Alcohol overdose
Alcoholic Alcoholism; alcohol dependency Drunk	Person with alcohol use disorder Alcohol use disorder Person who misuses alcohol/engages in unhealthy/hazardous alcohol use
Any mental health condition used to refer to a person (e.g., anxious, depressed, schizophrenic, traumatized)	Person who lives with/is experiencing anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, PTSD, etc.
Clean	Testing negative (for toxicology screen results) Not drinking or taking drugs Not currently or actively using drugs
Dirty	Testing positive (for toxicology screen results) Person who uses drugs
Drug abuse; substance abuse	Substance use disorder (SUD) Substance use condition
Habit	Drug addiction Substance use disorder (SUD)

<p>Medication-assisted treatment Opioid substitution replacement therapy</p>	<p>Medications for opioid use disorders Opioid agonist therapy Pharmacotherapy Addiction medication Medication for a substance use disorder</p> <p><b>Note:</b> The National Institute of Drug Abuse explains that it is a misconception that medications merely substitute one drug or one addiction for another. The term “medication-assisted treatment” implies that medication should have a supplemental or temporary role in treatment. Using “medications for opioid use disorders” aligns with the way other psychiatric medications are understood (e.g., antidepressants, antipsychotics) as critical tools that are central to a patient’s treatment plan.</p>
<p>Mental health defect/deficit/problem</p>	<p>Mental health need Mental health difference Mental health challenge</p>
<p>Mental health disorder</p>	<p>Mental illness Mental health condition</p>
<p>Mentally disabled</p>	<p>Person with an intellectual and/or developmental disability</p>
<p>Mentally ill person</p>	<p>Person with a mental illness Person with a serious mental illness Person with an untreated mental illness</p>
<p>Recovering alcoholic/addict Former addict Reformed addict</p>	<p>Person in recovery or long-term recovery Person who previously used drugs</p>
<p>Rehab; detox center</p>	<p>Treatment center (when referring to the physical place where treatment is provided) Substance use disorder treatment (when referring to the treatment received)</p>
<p>Relapse</p>	<p>Return to use Recurrence</p>
<p>Successful suicide; committed suicide</p>	<p>Died by suicide</p>
<p>Unsuccessful suicide; failed suicide</p>	<p>Attempted suicide</p>



# Criminal Justice System

The following terms are frequent labels used to describe people involved in the criminal justice system. These labels create stigmas that can attach to people for years—even decades—after their involvement in the system ends. The alternative terms are meant to encourage the use of language that is less stigmatizing so that impacted people are not forever stereotyped due to their experiences.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
Abuser Domestic abuser Batterer	Person accused/convicted of domestic violence Person accused/convicted of family violence Person accused/convicted of interpersonal violence Person accused/convicted of intimate partner violence
Battered person	Survivor of violence Victim of violence
Criminal; convict	Person convicted of a crime
Defendant	Person Person charged with/accused of a crime Person arrested/charged/accused
Ex-offender; ex-con; ex-inmate	Person who was system-involved Person with prior criminal justice system involvement Person who was incarcerated Person with lived experience Person reentering/rejoining the community Returning citizen
Felon	Person convicted of a felony
Female inmate; female offender; female population; women offenders	Woman who is/was incarcerated Justice-involved woman
Inmate; prisoner; detainee	Person in jail/prison Person is incarcerated
Juvenile delinquent	Young person arrested of a crime/status offense Young person adjudicated of a crime/status offense
Misdemeanant	Person convicted of a misdemeanor

Nonviolent offender	Person convicted of a nonviolent offense
Offender; perpetrator	Person who committed an offense
Parolee	Person on parole Person under community supervision
Probationer	Person on probation Person under community supervision
Repeat offender	Person convicted of a crime(s) more than once
Sex offender	Person convicted of a sex offense Person with a sex offense conviction
Special populations	People with specific needs
Supervised individual	Person sentenced to community supervision Person released to community supervision Person under community supervision Person being assisted by pretrial services Person receiving support from pretrial services
Victim	Survivor Person who was harmed  <b>Note:</b> The use of “victim” may sometimes be appropriate and/or preferred. For example, some system stakeholders refer to “victim services.” Some people identify as a “victim of crime” while others prefer the term “survivor.” Ask people for their preference.
Violent offender	Person convicted of a violent offense Person who committed a violent offense

# Community Supervision Services

The terms in the left-hand column are commonly used to describe the interactions, requirements, and relationships between community supervision practitioners and people on supervision. The alternative terms in the right-hand column switch the focus from tracking and monitoring toward promoting successful outcomes for people on supervision and for their communities.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
Alternatives to detention/incarceration	Programs Services Community-based programs
Ankle monitor	Electronic monitoring GPS monitoring
Contacts	Interactions Engagements Visits Meetings
Drug testing; urinalysis	Substance use monitoring
Field work	Engagement in the community
Enforce; detect; monitor	Incentivize compliance Encourage accountability Promote success Enhance intrinsic motivation
Phone reporting	Electronic communications Electronic supervision Mobile visit Electronic visit  <b>Note:</b> Although the term “phone reporting” does not have negative connotations, it does not accurately describe the type and extent of technology available to enhance community supervision. Using alternative terminology reflects the full range of tools and strategies available to promote successful outcomes, including advancements in technology, and the evolving nature of community supervision practices.
Reporting	Meeting Appointment

Rewards	Incentives Positive reinforcements
Sanction/punishment	Targeted intervention Response to noncompliant behavior/noncompliance
Treatment (when referring to nonmedical or behavioral health services)	Programs Services Interventions
Unsupervised reporting	Inactive supervision Administrative supervision

# Community Supervision Assessments and Planning

The community supervision field has made significant advances over the last several decades, including using instruments that assess the likelihood of future criminal conduct, referred to as “risk,” and that identify areas where interventions are appropriate, referred to as “criminogenic needs.” Although these terms may be appropriate and necessary for practical purposes during the adoption and internal use of these instruments, alternative terms are offered that decrease the stigma and labeling and focus on success.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
Avoiding criminal/undesirable associates and places Associating with other offenders/felons/ criminals	Creating prosocial relationships Engaging in prosocial activities
Criminogenic needs	Needs appropriate for interventions Factors most strongly associated with unlawful behavior  <b>Note:</b> It may sometimes be appropriate to continue using the term “criminogenic needs” as it is widely used, understood, and closely linked to the risk–need–responsivity (RNR) principles. However, we recognize the benefit of not using terms such as “criminal” during interactions with people on supervision or stakeholders. Needs can also be discussed from a strengths-based perspective, and one can instead talk of a person’s “protective factors.”
Placement	Approved residence Home placement
Risk (e.g., risk of recidivism, risk of failure to appear, risk of violations, etc.) High risk, moderate risk, and low risk	Likelihood of success Likelihood to remain law-abiding Likelihood to appear Likelihood to comply Higher likelihood of success Moderate likelihood of success Low likelihood of success  <b>Note:</b> The majority of people on community supervision succeed. We therefore encourage talking about “success” rather than “risk”. For instance, instead of saying someone is “high risk,” say they have a “low likelihood of success” or “low likelihood of remaining law-abiding.” However, we acknowledge there may be times when referring to “risk” or the “risk of recidivism” may be appropriate.

Risk profile	Assessment score Assessment report
Risk reduction strategies	Strategies to promote and incentivize success Prevention strategies

# Community Supervision Outcomes

Common community supervision outcomes—whether positive or negative—are often framed using terms with negative connotations. The alternatives offered here employ neutral or positive language to reframe the narrative; recognize the challenges encountered when taking steps to lead law-abiding, prosocial lives; and reinforce people’s positive accomplishments.

AVOID...	INSTEAD, USE...
AWOL; at large; absconded	Absent from supervision
Crime-free; offense-free	Law-abiding
Dirty urine; failed drug test	Positive test
Early release; termination	Earned discharge Successful completion of supervision
Failure to appear	<b>Note:</b> Referring to the fact that someone failed to appear in court is acceptable. However, when referring to measurable outcomes, refer to the positive activity of appearing, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Court appearances</li> <li>• Attendance at all court hearings</li> <li>• Court appearance rate</li> </ul>
Rearrest	New arrest Arrest
Reoffense	New offense  <b>Note:</b> When referring to measurable outcomes, refer to the positive activity of remaining law-abiding, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrest-free rate</li> <li>• Conviction-free rate</li> </ul>

# Appendix

The CSRC Language Guide complements the APPR Language Guide created by the Center for Effective Public Policy (CEPP): [APPR Language Guide: Words and Phrases to Effect Positive Change in the Pretrial System](#).

In addition, information gathered from the following organizations was considered in the development of the guide:

- [National Institutes of Health](#)
- [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)
- [Hogg Foundation](#)
- [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#)