
JHA POLICY ON USE OF LANGUAGE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED

At our core, JHA is a human rights organization. We monitor the conditions of confinement inside Illinois prisons, including the treatment that the men and women incarcerated in our prisons experience. We do this in order to promote transparency and accountability. And most importantly, we also believe that every person should be treated with dignity and respect regardless of legal status or any characteristic attributable to a human being. Onsite prison monitoring by JHA is essential to ensuring this value is upheld.

JHA realizes that there is no single word to use that is universally accepted or preferred by all people who have been impacted by criminal justice system involvement. Many of the men and women we meet in Illinois' prisons refer to themselves as "inmates," while others report finding that term to be derogatory. Some people see the labels commonly used to identify people who are in correctional custody as degrading and offensive; others believe these words are a description of status that do not confer value or judgement. In short, there are many different opinions about the use of language for people who have been denied their liberty.

JHA believes that what is important is not to act as an arbiter of the many different viewpoints about what language to use in our work when referring to the people whose interests are primary to our mission and day-to-day efforts, but to respect the growing consensus that language about people of any status or characteristic be primarily focused on their personhood. For several years JHA has been listening to and learning from our constituents, partners, and other stakeholders about use of language and labels related to carceral environments. We strive to be inclusive, respectful, and accurate.

From time to time, it is possible JHA may use some of the words found by some to be stigmatizing and offensive – such as "offender," "inmate," and "prisoner" – when quoting or citing other works or documents or if there are reasons related to accuracy to do so. However, going forward we will not use these terms independently to describe people who are incarcerated or detained. We make this clear choice to avoid using language that is considered offensive by many of our primary constituents in order to demonstrate our commitment to recognizing and respecting the humanity of all people.

The use of different language in the criminal justice or criminal legal system is perpetually up for debate; the conversation is ongoing, and standards are evolving. JHA supports use of language that is accurate and respectful of our common humanity. We will continue to participate in and monitor the ongoing discussions on use of language when referring to people who are incarcerated in order to ensure that the language we use best reflects our commitment to changing standards and norms, and most importantly, demonstrates respect for every person.

In July of 2021, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) began referring to the men and women inside Illinois' prisons as "individuals in custody" and "men and women in IDOC custody" in memos and data reports that are publicly available on the Department's website. This marks

an important shift by IDOC in recognizing that the people inside our prisons are people, and should be referred to as such. Using language that is person-focused advances the value that people who are incarcerated should be treated with dignity and respect. We hope that and will be watching to see if this language takes hold inside the prisons when correctional staff talk about and directly address the men and women who are incarcerated.