

Mother. Father. Aunt. Uncle. Brother. Sister.

These are just some of the words that describe people impacted by our criminal justice system. Yet too often we hear words like "felon," "inmate" and "offender" used to talk about people who have experienced incarceration. These labels—which are often unevenly applied based on individual biases—can permanently define people based on what is often the worst and lowest moment of their lives. They are dehumanizing, stigmatizing and promote a fallacy that mass incarceration is something happening to a small group of "bad people" when the reality is that 1 in 2 Americans has a family member who has been incarcerated. Dehumanizing labels make it difficult for people to rebuild their lives and succeed by limiting their ability to get jobs, housing, loans, and access opportunities. Research has also shown that they bias decision-makers and the public against reforms to improve our criminal justice system.

People First is a movement to honor the humanity of people in the criminal justice system. We became a country stained by mass incarceration by failing to recognize our shared humanity. We allow it to continue when we use biased labels that support outdated, ineffective criminal justice policy. We end it by reminding ourselves that people are people and choosing to put #PeopleFirst.



Why People First?

Dehumanizing people perpetuates mass incarceration.

Today, almost 2 million people are incarcerated in our country's jails and prisons—a 500% increase in the prison population since the 1970s. Despite reductions in the prison population over the past 12 years, the U.S. still locks up more people per capita than any other country. Failing to recognize our shared humanity allows mass incarceration to continue, despite the clear evidence that it does not bring us safety and instead causes real harm.

Incarceration hurts our families and communities.

Incarcerating people often increases the likelihood people will return to jail or prison in the future, destabilizes communities and increases racial disparities in society. Black people are incarcerated in state prisons at five times the rate of white people and are 50% more likely to have an immediate family member who has spent time in jail or prison. People who have experienced incarceration and their families have a lifetime of reduced earnings and a shortened life expectancy. We don't have to accept these outcomes for our family members and neighbors. We can put people first.

HISTORY OF A MOVEMENT

People impacted by the criminal justice system have long demanded an end to dehumanizing labels and practices and won meaningful changes in how people in the system are represented and treated. In 2006, formerly incarcerated leader Eddie Ellis of the NuLeadership Policy group penned "An Open Letter to our Friends on the Question of Language," in which he said, "If we cannot persuade you to refer to us, and think of us, as people, then all our other efforts at reform and change are seriously compromised." Since then, a powerful movement has grown demanding language, policies and practices that put people first.

Words matter.

Dehumanizing labels are extremely common, and they bias people against reform. As Norris Henderson, founder and Executive Director of Voice of the Experienced and Voters Organized to Educate, says: "when audiences read and hear words like "felon" and "inmate" they are more afraid of, less open to, less curious about, and less supportive of people with experiences like mine and the opportunities that would make me most safe and free." When respondents to two nationally representative surveys were asked which words they associated with "person with a felony conviction," 50% chose a positive or neutral word, and half chose a negative word. "Felon" elicited a very different response—with more than two out of three respondents expressing a negative association.

In addition to biasing people against proven criminal justice reforms that advance safety, dehumanizing labels make it harder for people to live and thrive after incarceration. One in three Americans has a criminal record—as many as have a college degree. When people are defined by their criminal record the negative consequences on employment and housing are profound, and cause serious harm to our economy and communities. We can all play a role in building a safer, more successful country simply by choosing to put people first.

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What does it mean to put People First?

Putting people first in our language.

Entrepreneur. Teacher. Parent. Employer. Reporter. Community member. Person in prison. We are all more than one aspect of our lives. And we can all reject words like "inmate" "felon" and "offender" that hold back too many Americans and embrace person-first language that combats stigma and helps people thrive.

Putting people first in policy.

As we reject harmful language and "tough-on-crime" rhetoric, we can also reject outdated, ineffective policies. This could mean updating our hiring or housing practices to be inclusive of people with criminal records. It also means supporting a wide range of criminal justice reforms that build a fairer, safer, and more successful America.

Learning from people who know.

People who have been incarcerated know first-hand the impacts of dehumanizing language and policies. Putting people first means recognizing and supporting their leadership in conversations about how to improve the criminal justice system.

Pursuing real safety together.

When we see people in the criminal justice system as people, the next step is to support effective safety strategies that reflect our shared values and humanity. Incarceration diverts 180 billion taxpayer dollars each year away from investments in people and communities that have proven to address the root causes of crime.

What can I do to join the People First movement?

Learn

Learn about the harms of biased language, the consequences of mass incarceration and the success of community safety solutions.

Use

Use person-first language like "person in prison" or "person with a felony conviction" when talking about our neighbors and family members in the criminal justice system. Or just use people's names!

Discuss

Discuss the importance of putting people first when we talk and think about the criminal justice system at work and at home. You can also write letters to the editor asking them to put people first in their language and reporting.

Support

Support policies and practices that recognize people as people. That could mean changing hiring practices to give people with criminal records a fair chance, or asking your elected officials to stand up for criminal justice reform.

Join

Become a People First Ambassador. Request and wear a People First shirt by emailing peoplefirst@fwd.us, post a photo online and tell others why you choose to put #PeopleFirst.